

Citizens' Voices

Insights from focus groups conducted in England for the project, *At Home in One's Past*.

Sophie Gaston

DEMOS

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INTRODUCTION

We've gone the wrong direction, haven't we?

I think we've lost the values that we had then.

It don't feel like our country anymore.

Between October and December 2017, my colleague Peter Harrison-Evans and I led an extensive series of focus groups across England, as part of the research for the project *At Home in One's Past*. These focus groups have convened a diverse mix of citizens by age, socio-economic status and ethnicity, however the majority of participants have been over-55s and White British. Locations have included a wide range of cities, towns and suburbs, such as Bermondsey in London, Havering, Birmingham, Leeds, Yorkshire, and Sunderland.

While these focus groups have been conducted to explore the depth and variety of nostalgic feeling in contemporary Britain, they have also produced valuable insights into citizens' perspectives on our contemporary politics, society and culture.

As Britain experiences a time of immense change and upheaval during Brexit negotiations, and with deep chasms palpable between citizens, we have taken the decision to publish a wide-ranging selection of quotes from these conversations. At Demos, we regularly conduct focus groups in the UK and internationally, and are privileged to bear witness to the unscripted opinions of British citizens. We consider there is considerable public value in sharing some of these at this particular time.

The focus groups from which these quotations were drawn were recorded and transcribed verbatim – keeping the nuances of participants' speech. We have made every effort to fairly and accurately represent the full spectrum of viewpoints on various issues, in all their light and shade, and while I am frequently heartened in focus groups to see Britain at its most tolerant, generous, optimistic and cohesive, I also offer a warning that some readers may find certain aspects of the content in this report challenging.

All contributions have been fully anonymised to protect the identity of citizens. A full report, with further insights and analysis from our qualitative research across four other European countries, will be published later in 2018.

Sophie Gaston, Deputy Director, Demos
January 2018

1. ECONOMIC CHANGE

Globalisation and De-Industrialisation

Participants of our focus groups were greatly aware of having lived through structural changes in Britain's economy, and while many remain buoyant about our overall prospects for economic growth, there is a lack of clarity about what our profitable industries of the future might be, in the face of highly competitive global markets.

- *We produce world-class products. And then someone else comes over and makes it half price and so we lose that trade because someone is just making it cheap.*
- *We have the technology, a lot of technology is designed here, it is British technology and the idea is behind it. But there is people elsewhere that are gonna take that. Like the Chinese, they have cheap labour, cheap manufacturing, so they make it, we buy it.*

In the North of England, the legacy of de-industrialisation continues to live large in the social and economic conversation. Many participants recalled a time of greater prosperity, when it felt like "there was plenty of jobs here, there was plenty of money". In these regions, Prime Minister Thatcher was consistently mentioned for her role in this economic transformation, which participants broadly felt had "gutted" communities. We also observed some interest in reviving these industries as a strategy to boost growth after Brexit.

- *Years ago, there was thousands of jobs; loads of different factories, shipyards, coal mines and now there's nothing at all.*
- *The North-East, it was a big mining area. I mean, when I was small, my dad was a miner. All along the North-East there was all these coal mines.*
- *It will be about 20 years [before we bounce back after Brexit] because not many people want to go down the mines now. And we got to build it [industry], because until there's mining and until there's steel again, we won't have no industry.*
- *Leeds was a big financial centre for insurance and banking and now that's been cut right back. Now you drive down the hedge row and all the offices that used to be insurance offices are now wine bars. All the banks used to be there.*
- *They could open all the factories again [...] It would give everybody like more job opportunities but then that gives us back our status as well.*

Decline in Quality of Jobs and Social Mobility

There has been much discussion about globalisation's 'left behinds' over recent years, and participants could certainly identify material impacts to their own careers from structural economic change, and the opportunities available to younger generations. They observed a kind of ruthlessness and hyper-competitiveness in the labour market, which appears skewed towards the interests of employers. Participants were acutely aware of the emotional and social consequences of these changes on the dignity of workers and the stability of their communities.

- *There was no zero-hour contracts kicking about then, now there are loads kicking about and [...] they're not good jobs at all.*
- *It was a time when you had pride in yourself when you had jobs like that.*
- *It's impossible today to get a job being a single mother. It really is, I've tried for years.*
- *Jobs were secure then; no job is secure now.*
- *Years ago, when you had an apprenticeship, you had a person that owned their own company and they took on an apprentice...it would be in their interest to take on that apprentice. That apprentice was going to be the best he or she could be, so that when they went on a day off they trusted them. Nowadays, they take on an apprentice, on a low wage, and they don't care if it doesn't work out.*
- *Back in them days, the employees had the power, 'cause they would start at a factory on a Monday, and if they didn't like that job go and get another job on the Tuesday. Now it's employers who've got the power and [...] they've got the pick of the crop.*
- *You can get a call centre job, but you know [...] or bar work or something like that, there's lots of waitress and bar work...but it's very low paid work.*
- *A lot of people work shifts nowadays, don't they? Six to ten. [...] Because we're living under 24-hour services.*
- *I think the businesses as well, work on the basis that we can pay people a low salary, a low wage because it's going to be made up by Government benefits.*
- *I think things have changed a lot. When I got my degree, you felt like you were guaranteed a good job, whereas for lots of kids now, they're coming out of university, working in call centres...Or you know, [they are] a lot less paid than you'd expect from a graduate.*

Many participants also discuss the erosion of opportunities for progression within occupations, compromising avenues for social mobility, particularly between the working and middle classes. There was also a feeling that systems were becoming rigged against ordinary workers, with the Government and private sector alike privileging some groups of citizens, or 'big business', over others.

- *My own parents, my dad was a docker, my mum used to work as a dinner lady and [...] they ended up buying their house; they ended up quite well. My daughter [...] she works long hours [...] and she can't afford to buy her own home!*
- *I think there was more opportunities. You started at the bottom and you worked your way right up to the top [...] Now what they're doing, even in the police, they're fast-tracking them. They're fast-tracking people to management.*
- *You got big companies and all that [...] you know the Government's only taxing them like one per cent or something like that, it's ridiculous. While we get taxed, you know, and it's like we just cannot survive.*
- *I think people these days don't necessarily get an escalating salary, whereas you did when I was younger.*

- *They used to start as like a junior didn't you, in an office and then you did the basics and you worked way up, worked your way up.*
- *Back in the day if you were a supervisor, let's say, in the 70s, you were fairly revered, you know and respected. Whereas now, if you're a supervisor, you may only be one step removed from somebody's that pulling the pints.*
- *[In the past] you could start out and think, actually in 17 years, I can be a manager, whereas now that's just not the case.*
- *To me the element of the population that suffers the most are not the people on benefits, but the people just above the line where you qualify for benefits; they don't get anything.*

For those not currently in employment, political and social attitudes towards welfare can feel hurtful and discriminatory:

- *So, we kind of get less than nothing. Because we get, we don't have any jobs, and then everybody gets into trouble for not having a job, but then there isn't actually any jobs to get!*
- *It seems there's a big divide between them and us, people kind of think people who are on benefits are kind of cheats. And many things feed into that. Television programmes, all sorts of things.*

For some participants, the stress of financial insecurity has become all-consuming, challenging their capacity for hope and optimism for the future.

- *We're going back to the Victorian times. Victorian times had it better than what we have.*
- *It's not even just the working-class anymore, it's like, what about the people that want to work who're on income support, who've got kids and they're like living on nothing to try keep a roof over your head and food on the table...it's just impossible.*
- *It's got so much more stressful and more worrying and more concerning, thinking about 'are we actually gonna have food on our table?', and 'are we actually gonna have roof over our heads?' So yes, life's got a lot more stressful.*

Participants were clear in their view that it is more difficult to be struggling today than in the past, primarily because of the erosion of close-knit community support. They voiced fears about the precariousness of their financial positions, and how easily even 'comfortable' citizens could find themselves in extremely challenging situations.

- *Things go wrong really quickly now, don't they? I mean, they spiral very, very quickly from the point where I can be in my house, in my job, driving my car, and lose my job, not pay my bills, get repossessed, and be out and living in a hostel. [...] it's so easy, it is so easy.*
- *It's easier to fall down a level than it is to go up. It's easier to fail now than it's ever been.*

- *One of the questions I always have in my mind is [...] if I lost my job today — how would I feel? I'd be quite frightened. You just think to yourself, right all my bills are still going out and I really need to get a job, will I be able to fall into something just really easy? You can send 100 applications off and not get any replies.*

Pensions

Another issue feeding into the sense of precariousness for many older citizens, and which consistently animated participants in our focus groups, was pensions – especially frustration that, after having worked hard, the rise in the pension age and the ‘irresponsible’ handling of their pension funds is imperilling the happy retirement they had imagined. There was some acknowledgement, however, that while they were being hard done by, the younger generations would be lucky to receive any pensions whatsoever.

- *We've all been penalised because we've got to work longer now.*
- *We've worked all our lives, paid into the system and we can't, well I can't have my pension until I'm 66 now.*
- *Anybody over 50 should have been able to get the pension when they should have had it. We have worked all our lives and we've paid into the system.*
- *I worked at [redacted] for 20 years, paid into the pension all that time, and 10 years after I left, I got a letter from the pension people saying I may not get a pension when I come to claim it, because the money that they paid in, they invested into Icelandic banks, and Icelandic banks went tits up. There's nothing you can do about it and it's absolutely scandalous. They're just playing with your future.*

2. PUBLIC SERVICES

We observed that discussions about public policy in the focus groups tended to focus on the same two topics: the NHS and the renationalisation of public services. Broadly, these conversations indicated that Britons favour increased investment in the NHS and a return to a greater 'public service' culture in health and education spending, after years of 'corporate' thinking around targets and standardisation; and public ownership of a number of core services, particularly trains, with a focus on improved accountability;

The NHS

Not one participant in our focus groups expressed the sense that the NHS is currently performing well, and we observed lengthy observations about a decline in standards and the poor treatment of staff. Consistent among the focus groups was the feeling that the introduction of performance targets, and the 'privatisation' of the NHS to trusts and contractors, had shifted the focus from patient care to finance. There was a clear understanding of the social care crisis and the impact this is having on the core health service. Participants again referred strongly to the need for a contributory system, and many stated that they had 'paid in' their share over the course of their lives.

- *I worked in the NHS [...] for about thirteen years and I was really proud to work for the NHS, because the NHS as a body had a really good ethos for caring. Then what happened [...] it was all about business focus, it wasn't about care. Care was a secondary element. In two years' time, the NHS really went downhill. Today, I think the NHS is really, really on its knees.*
- *It's down to austerity, with the cutbacks in social services, there are more problems landing in the door of A&E. A&E get criticised for not meeting targets, but the problem is social care is not there within the community to the extent it used to be.*
- *You go to A&E on any night of the week and a lot of the people going in are on first name terms with the staff because they're going in time and time again, because really they should be in a care home of some description.*
- *If we're a civilised society, we should be providing care for the more unfortunate in society. And we seem to have just washed our hands of that.*
- *We need to go back to grassroots that we used to have. I mean, the ethos of the NHS was free care for everyone and unfortunately now that's not possible for many reasons. I think the main reason now is that the investment's not there.*
- *What they're wanting is a superman on £2.50 an hour, so they're wanting people to be able to perform at this top end and do everything, whereas at one point, three people may have split those roles and done those roles really well. [Matrons] now, they're having to look at bed management systems, IT systems you know, it's all business, business, business and whatever care is secondary.*
- *[In the NHS] they have this horrendous term called "essential criteria", and there's six of them, and if you don't meet one of those you just go in the bin.*
- *Even doctors, they did a pie graph and they said that when they worked it all out, they were spending two-thirds of their time on paper work and a third seeing the patients.*

- *For me they should look at stopping running the NHS as a business and focus back on health care, and they should invest in being able to promote and provide healthcare.*
- *If you go back 50 years, what was expected as routine treatment under the national health and dental services was not what was expected as routine now. We are paying out billions of pounds for braces for every child that goes through school... 50 years ago it wouldn't have happened. My teeth are crooked because we didn't get braces, we lived with it. So we are paying and giving far more away to people and that's where a lot of money is going. As a society, we have to decide where that stops.*

Renationalisation

Broadly, participants across all focus groups were in favour of renationalisation of multiple public services, particularly transport. In many sessions, the concept elicited wholesale support. The major arguments in favour were that it would encourage greater political accountability and prove a stabilising force on the cost of services. This view was consistent across Conservative and Labour-leaning participants, as well as those who voted Leave or Remain. Implicit in the support for renationalisation was a palpable scepticism about the motivations of private owners, their pricing strategies, and the capacity of Government to have oversight and intervention in 'unfair' markets.

- *I think most of the people would like to see it go back to national industries.*
- *Look at the health service [...] look at how much they charge for rail travel, but look at the service that you get. Just a 25 per cent increase in prices.*
- *It's better when somebody's accountable.*

When concerns about nationalisation were expressed, they centred on fears that it would reduce inefficiencies that the private sector could offer, and a lack of conviction that prices would reduce substantially.

- *I'm not sure that's the right thing to do, there was a lot of wastage in the gas industries, and a lot of people – they were very heavily over-staffed.*

3. SOCIETY

Materialism, Greed and Inequality

Participants recalled that in the past, society seemed glued together by a more cohesive sense of collective identity and inclusivity; the distinction between groups appeared to be less profound, meaning the relatability of experience and opportunity was greater.

- *Back in them days, everybody had nothing, everyone was in the same boat.*
- *There wasn't that pressure [in society]...you just accepted the fact that you weren't gonna get a holiday every year, you weren't gonna get two cars, you weren't gonna have new furniture. And if somebody else was getting something you'd usually say, oh what you gonna do with your old one, can I have it?*
- *Well I think rich people are taking advantage because, if a rich person crashes their car, they're not bothered, they're going to buy a new one. And they're not really worried about their insurance going up, but yet it affects people who have to use a car to get to work and stuff...they can no longer pay for it.*

Participants described the erosion of common values, and the adoption of a culture of "greed and materialism". Responsibility was directed at misguided urban renewal projects in the 1960s and 70s, the failures of modern parenting, and also the profiteering of the private sector: described by one participant as "legalised thieves". Participants expressed their concerns about modern societal "isolation" and how many people now, particularly the elderly, "don't have anyone to help you" and are becoming "self-contained".

- *I think it probably started in the 80s, I'm biased, but I can remember Thatcher saying 'there's no such thing as society, only the individual'. And I think the balance changed a lot.*
- *I think society is based these days on greed and materialism. I think that is the root of evil, the reality of everything now.*
- *Maybe it's bad parenting that's creating it? You know, if you don't teach young people the rights and wrongs and manners from they're never going to adapt to that.*
- *People are less willing to help other people. So, because you kind of, you become in your own little bubble, that's where you see that, the rise of the, of a more sort of selfish being.*
- *It takes a community to bring up a child and if you haven't got a community this is where the problems start.*
- *There was a lot of community cohesion there, and as you say, everybody knew each other. We lived in flats and everybody knew each other. [...] You know the maternity clothes got passed around. the kids' clothes got passed round, and you know, none of the kids felt awful about wearing the kid round the corners' clothes second hand — they just accepted it. I don't know if that would happen now.*
- *People are isolated and don't look out for each other.*

- *They started demolishing rows of terraced houses where people knew everybody in that street and started putting everybody in high rise flats, then nobody communicated anymore.*
- *[In] the street, you won't say a thing now, you'd be frightened of saying something.*
- *I don't think there was as much crime then, I'm sure there wasn't. You could leave your door open and no one would break in.*
- *Right now, if I saw a woman in a car that broken down, there was a time when I would have stopped and said 'Can I help ya?'. I wouldn't dare now! If you saw a child in a street and you thought that child was lost, you wouldn't dare to approach that child now because of what consequences of that simple action might be.*

Some Northern participants identified the South of England as particularly exposed to a decline in community values.

- *Down Devon, where they have honesty car parks, no one's putting money in. And that's cultural identity. There you get so many people who are not from that community, you know and I think because there are so many people, especially in the South where it's less friendly, it's less culturally connected, because there's so many people coming in from everywhere. And the pace of life is even faster there.*

Participants were aware of the individual costs of isolation, including flow-on impacts for mental health and alcoholism. They described the changing face of their communities, as pubs and independent shops closed, replaced by boarded up windows and community shopping mega-centres.

- *But you know, people are getting more isolated and that makes them more vulnerable and as you say, has a knock on for mental health.*
- *So many pubs closing because you can get alcohol cheaper in the supermarkets, so people do that and drink it home, because it's cheaper, so they're not going to the pub and then the pubs are closing. And your local used to be part of social centre.*
- *On [redacted] street, I used to shop there quite a lot, I took my mum up there and it was, it was almost like a traditional, you know [...] there were big shops but there were also independent shops [...] and I went there just a couple weeks ago and it's changed out of all recognition.*

Respect

The most frequently cited value participants in focus groups across the country perceive to be missing from contemporary British society is 'respect', a topic discussed at length. This is intrinsically linked to a sense of declining standards of discipline in the education system, which teachers are unable to enforce as the balance of power has shifted towards parents.

- *What have we lost? Manners, respect, discipline.*
- *Our society has totally lost respect. It's just got no respect for anyone or anything.*

- *When you look back at it all, we were frightened of the police, we were frightened of teachers, but all that now it's gone out the window. I mean the police now are trying to do the job with one armed tied behind their backs, so are the teachers, exactly the same. They're too frightened of what actually might happen and some of the kids are just a riot, because they know that the consequences are probably negligible.*
- *When I went to school you used to think, oh god, I've got to go to headmaster. The cane! And you dreaded telling your parents, didn't you?*
- *The teachers can't even tell the students off, they just get a mouthful of abuse back! It's why staff are being killed in the school, it's about respect.*
- *You used to have to stand up for your elders, didn't you? If you ever saw an old person or a pregnant lady you would stand up.*
- *The fire service was [parked in someone's drive], and I think somebody put a note, saying you're blocking the entrance to my house and you know, they're going to save lives. That's the day and age we're living in.*

Community Displacement

In focus groups with white working-class residents in London, there were acute concerns about the impact of gentrification and the depreciation of social housing supply on the breakdown of communities. Many had grown up with their parents employed in London's dockyards and industry, and had lived through slum demolitions and early waves of dislocation for council tenants, and are now fearful that London will “end up a playground on the rich”.

One participant explained that while she had lived for decades in council housing in South London, “My children, they can't live near me, they can't afford to live near me.” They described the pain of friends and family who were being forced to move because of the tide of incoming “upper class hipsters” in areas like Peckham.

- *One of the worst things is, they sold council housing, they should never have sold social housing.*
- *The council done it all wrong, they got rid of all their caretakers that use to live on site to keep the people safe.*
- *I lived two doors away when I moved away from my mum, and my sister moved opposite. It was a community and there was other people there, they lived there, they grew up so we all looked after each other's children, so we all looked out for each other. It was a community.*
- *These singles mothers who have been there shipped out of London to somewhere, in the middle of nowhere, they're losing their support system, their family.*
- *I used to let my kids play round the front and my Mum she would come round at eight o'clock at night and shout at all the kids 'get in', and my kids would come running. It was a community.*

Crime and Safety

While participants felt strongly that there has been a decline in 'respect' in British society, they also feel that standards of law and order have been lowered. They described prison sentences as too lenient, the system too focused on the needs of perpetrators, and also made strong links between crime and immigration. In a number of focus groups, we heard from women who described feeling unsafe at night on the streets of their communities, and felt that the police were unable to protect them due to Government budget cuts.

- *They just get their hand smacked now, there's no police around anymore. They don't have the resources...they've been cut back like everything else.*
- *Bring back hanging [...] I tell you what, it would stop...this rise in acid attacks. It takes one person to hang and it would stop.*
- *They're allowing criminals back onto the street, when they've served 50 per cent of their sentence, and well that's crazy to me. You know, if they're given a 15-year sentence then they should serve a 15-year sentence. And if they don't behave, then extend it.*
- *I read in the paper actually, that these British people are fighting with ISIS and the idea now is...to give them houses when they come back and give them jobs. Can we have a referendum on that? I think I know what the answer would be.*
- *I often feel scared when out on my own now. I wouldn't walk on the streets alone.*
- *I didn't used to feel so afraid, but the streets just don't feel safe at night any more.*
- *I made my husband bring me in tonight because I didn't want to walk through the city on my own, because eight months ago, I was coming out of where I was working one night and I was a bit scared. I was getting in the lift to the car park, and I was thinking, I'm feeling a bit uncomfortable here.*

However, although participants felt that Britain has lost some of its innocence, there was some acknowledgement that crimes such as child sexual abuse were now more likely to be made public and that, while these revelations had complicated their memories and cast a sense of unease around the past, on the whole it was a positive development that we live in a more open and transparent time.

- *Things were going on in the world that we didn't know about, and things were going on in society that we didn't know about, like all the problems with Catholic schools, Church, all the abuse and everything. All that's all come out, over the last 10 years.*
- *The one good thing from the past to now is that child abuse [experiences] won't disappear, because now we listen.*

4. CULTURAL IDENTITY

Invariably, discussion in the focus groups settled on an exploration of Britain's cultural identity and the perception that aspects of the national values that underpin this are being eroded. Crucially, participants felt that in decades past, this identity had served a unifying national purpose, but now many of them feel that cosmopolitanism, immigration and cultural and religious pluralism has suppressed patriotic expression and resulted in confusion and resentment about the boundaries of political correctness.

Political Correctness

This subject particularly incensed participants throughout all focus groups. Political correctness is widely seen to have been over-extended, with any social value in an emphasis on respect and plurality having been exhausted, and now actively infringing on the foundations of British society important to many citizens.

Participants reported feeling that British politics and the media now focus too heavily on the rights and needs of minority groups, and that there is an absence of 'fair exchange' of tolerance between minority groups and dominant White British, Christian culture – which is expected to constantly adapt. They also felt that, as the previously dominant group, Whites did not have active civil society representation to support their heritage to the same extent that minorities do, which has compromised their voice in the public sphere.

- *There are too many do-gooders around to tell you what you can't do, rather tell you what you can do.*
- *We've got too many political correctness people, too many do-gooders trying to run the country.*
- *At work we have an equality and diversity team, so I get what they're doing, don't get me wrong, it's brilliant stuff. But there's an inordinate amount of resources for the needs of two people, when there are 3000 people overall. So think it has to be proportionate.*
- *People are very afraid to stand up and say well I think that's wrong, because then they get this label to say that they're against you know, liberalisation and things like that. So people who want to speak out are frightened of that because they get labelled.*
- *It's the minority groups who have ruined the country. Because every time they [the Government] come up with something, there are groups that will protest and say this is against my rights, so then the Government thinks, 'Well we better not do that' and they go off to something else. And I am sure that we are dominated by small groups of people who don't like something - if they don't like something they make a lot of noise and so the Government backs down because it's easier.*
- *It feels like you're standing on eggshells sometimes.*
- *In speaking to or referring to someone from the Caribbean, now I've always referred to them as being coloured, but now...you can't say that.*
- *We can't even call a blackboard a blackboard anymore, I mean what is all that about? I mean it's an absolute joke! If someone's black, they're black and if someone's white they're white — what difference does it make?*

- *I mean, can you go into Homebase and buy black paint? So what's the problem?*
- *On the telly where [they've] just done a report about all the ethnic minorities, [they focus on] what they feel, but no one comes to the Whites and asks us how we feel.*
- *All the politicians and the big wigs in power are bending over backwards for all the ethnic minorities in this country.*

Patriotism and the Union Jack

- *On Empire Day, I used to march around the street carrying the Union Jack...now you're not supposed to fly them, you're not allowed.*
- *When I was young we had Guy Fawkes parties...that's all gone. In Tower Hamlets, they have fireworks but they're Indian now, they're not English.*
- *For some reason, can make lots of money out of St Patrick's Day, but when you celebrate St George's day you're a racist.*
- *People see the English flag as a nationalist flag, don't they?*
- *My husband's got a van and it's got an English flag and [...] he's been doing this business for 40-odd years and he actually got pulled up the other day by somebody, and they said why have you got an English flag on your van?*
- *That's the way it's gone unfortunately, where we can't be proud of our own flag.*
- *[There are] too many people coming into our country and not knowing anything about it, and trying to get rid of Christmas and St George's Day.*
- *My son-in-law is in the army, and [...] he's been all over the world on different tours and that, and he said [...] in America, if you go to an attraction they basically say are they the armed forces [...] and they stand up and they get a round of applause. Now, in this country, our army, our guys that fight for us, are not allowed to wear their uniforms and be recognisable as a member of our armed forces, which to me is quite atrocious.*

White British Identity

These focus groups bore witness to scant evidence of overt racial prejudices in our focus groups, with concerns regarding immigration predominantly pertaining to issues around civic conceptions of citizenship and social contribution (see more below). Nonetheless, some participants from White British backgrounds, particularly in more deprived communities, spoke openly about their concerns that their cultural identity, history and values were being eroded.

- *The Whites are a minority in this country and we don't get nothing.*
- *We are forgotten race and we are a dying race.*
- *Everywhere you walk [...] and everywhere you go it's foreign voices in your ear.*
- *We're a dying race...in 30 years' time, you won't find a white face.*
- *If you want to go into Brixton, outside Victoria line station, just take one look and you'll see...there's nothing English.*

Christian Culture

- *They're absolutely terrified to be called racist, and that's the problem. Everything's cut short, we can't say this, we can't do that. And that's terrifying. At the end of the day, it's a Christian country and people should abide by our religion in this country and sometimes that doesn't happen.*
- *As a Christian country, that's our country and we're happy to embrace other religions and other faith groups, but is it the same on the opposite side to embrace what we're doing in this country? I don't know, sometimes when I read things, and I think to myself, it's not an equal playing field here, we're happy to do it, but other groups aren't too happy to integrate.*
- *And I just think this is a Christian country, well it was, and it's not anymore. And I feel that was my life, the life that I knew. I grew up here.*
- *If you're a Christian, and I say something about Christianity that you don't like, you may retaliate verbally and discuss, but you would accept it. But if I said something to you as a Muslim, I would be so condemned as racist or religiohobe, or whatever. And I think the balance has swayed and tipped too far in the other way.*
- *Councils, Government, people, they're all scared to say anything. It's like nursery rhymes, all the words are changed in case somebody gets offended. Christmas, people are talking about Christmas cards, "don't say Happy Christmas, say happy festival time, because you may offend somebody". And that is taking our identity away.*
- *My son [...] he'd come out of school, he'd have to walk down to hockey practice and he had to walk past [redacted] and he used to have abuse hurled at him every day by a whole group of Asian lads. My husband went to the police station and said, my son can't walk down the road without being abused, and they said there's nothing we can do. Now if that had been the other way round, it would have been squashed.*
- *When we get immigration into this country, we're told 'Well, you know, you'll offend them if you do that, you'll offend them if you do this, and you mustn't do that'. And our laws and our culture, our British culture, is not acknowledged.*
- *So, I always thought I was dead against discrimination until I had a really interesting experience in an airport. I went into the toilets and there was a huge queue, and the reason that there was a huge queue was because the back section had been turned into a foot washing area, for people to prepare for their religious observations. I suddenly stood there and thought, how do I feel about this, actually I didn't feel very positive. Because half the toilets had gone, I don't mind if they took a little bit of the toilet, but don't take half my toilets away, please.*
- *My wife works in a school and when it was Halloween, she was asked to teach about ghosts and witches and she's a Christian and she didn't want to do that. [...] But it seems, when you start talking about Christian things, like my wife wanting to talk about Christian things at Christmas she was told she couldn't. Because it may offend other groups.*
- *There's too much focus on tolerance for us, and I don't think there's enough on the other side and we're not meeting in the middle. This is the thing, I'm all for tolerance if*

it's an equal street not if it's, you know, 75 per cent one way and then we'll be tolerant when we fancy it.

- *Look at how many churches have closed and houses, look at how many Mosques have been built. I'm not being racist but there's just a massive difference.*
- *In places like Birmingham, they don't refer to Christmas anymore, they talk about the winter holiday or, they've got a particular phrase for it without having the religious connotation.*
- *We've lost our identity. We can't even be allowed to celebrate our identity, because it's upsetting other religions.*
- *I mean what about these situations where you can't wear a cross anymore, I mean that is scandalous, didn't somebody get sacked for that?*

5. IMMIGRATION

It is clear that immigration continues to be an energising topic in focus groups, with citizens' attentions largely focused on the subjects of integration and welfare chauvinism. More recent migrants to Britain seem to be the focus of a greater proportion of mistrust and disapproval from participants than those who came several decades ago, with a view that previous generations of migrants have earned their place in society through their willingness to contribute and their respect for British values.

- *The West Indians that came to this country in the late-40s and early-50s were invited here by our Government and they worked and they got their own houses...they didn't take other people's jobs away, and they went where the bacon [jobs] were.*
- *The immigrants that got in now, they're not working, or they're working for their money and sending it off.*
- *If you, as a young person, didn't stand up on the bus, your name would be dirt in the area... and all the dockers, some of them wouldn't even sit on the bus even if a seat was empty because they'd say oh we wouldn't want to spoil someone's nice clothes. They [immigrants] don't know respect. They don't respect the elderly, they're not taught.*

Contributory Welfare

Participants made clear distinctions between migrants who are self-supporting through employment, contributing to the tax base, and those who are receiving benefits – reinforcing their frustration with what they perceive to be a welfare system increasingly failing to deliver on the contributory principles they expect. Participants broadly favour high-skilled immigration, but have little appetite for low-skilled or dependent migration.

- *Too many people coming into the country and taking from the country, you know benefits and everything else, when they haven't paid anything into the country.*
- *There's also quite a lot of people coming in for health tourism and that's a massive draw on the NHS. They try and charge back for that treatment but there just isn't the system there to do that. If we go on holiday to Spain or whatever, what's the first thing that happens? Healthcare insurance!*
- *It's the type of people that are coming in, not just quantities. Low quality.*
- *[We want] people that are coming into to work, to make a good living and who want to pay their taxes and whatever...not them people that are just coming in to live of the state.*
- *At the end of the day, look, we're not gonna stop immigration, but I think what it's down to, if people have got jobs and come into this country that's fine, there's nothing wrong with that.*
- *Whether it's picking fruit or what have you, or joining the NHS, what people were against, and me included, was people coming to the country that have no jobs that couldn't speak English and just drained the country. We all play taxes; we've paid taxes all our lives.*

- *My parents were immigrants to this country. And it's been wonderful, we were given education, we were given health, but we put back what we actually take.*
- *If you have someone who comes here to this country and is here for 10 years but never switches a language... I don't think that's good enough.*

Border Control

The vast majority of participants were relatively pragmatic about the UK's need for 'sustainable' levels of immigration, but they felt strongly that our border policy has become increasingly uncontrolled, linking this to impacts on public services and even terrorism.

- *You have to have a percentage of immigrants. To build your society. But it does need some control over it. Personally, I would go for a system as I say, other countries have, where you have to show what you are going to bring to the country. Just make it fairer.*
- *We just have an open door. That's why people voted for Brexit.*
- *Immigration was basically uncontrolled, they were coming in by lorry, by donkey cart, and nobody knew, and even if they came in on a plane, or a bus, nobody knew. And when they got here nobody knew where they were.*
- *You have to be sensible about it. You have to have a plan and you have to have a budget. That's what we need to do. Now, I think because the system is open border to Europe, there are people who for all these reasons want to come to Europe. What they do is they select where the best systems are, so what you tend to find is a high immigration in UK, Germany - countries that can actually sustain having these people there.*
- *Even after Brexit, the fact that we have all these terrorist attacks which are not caused by British people. So people's perception is that there are people in this country that want to be radicalised. And you know, that doesn't help.*

International students were seen favourably, and participants felt it was 'common sense' to regard them distinctly from other forms of migrants. Many even called for greater recognition of the contribution they make as ambassadors for British soft power.

- *If students come, they're coming to study...the other immigrants, they come in and they're making a drain on the country, the NHS and social security, so there is a complete difference. You know, if people are coming to study, great, let them study!*
- *I think the point that we missed with international students is [there should be] a lot of emphasis put on being ambassadors of England. At [some] universities, what they do is they really put a lot of time and effort in, when that student goes back then they are ambassadors for our education, for our buildings, for our cities and so what.*

Integration

Participants also observed failings in Government policy around integration and concerns that the visible aspects of diversity, such as new languages, new shops, and new products, were not consistently enriching their communities. It was clear that many participants do

not feel that the responsibilities of citizenship are being respected by all immigrant groups, and that there is an uneven interest in assimilating to British cultural values.

- *One of the policies the Government brought in was to clump all the faith groups together in the same space, which maybe good initially because then they can set up community but then all of a sudden you just get clumps of different people that don't want to mix together.*
- *When I go back to see my mum, it's not a safe place to walk about and when I were there it was. [...] Maybe that's because of the different groups that aren't coming together.*
- *Down in [redacted] Street, you've got Romanian Gypsies going up and down, and they don't think twice about urinating in the middle of the street without even going and hiding behind the bush. They even defecate as well.*
- *It started off where you could see maybe five or six people initially going back three year ago, and it's gradually built and built and built. From being one shop that's selling foreign foods or whatever to being maybe eight or nine all around my street.*
- *What's different is, there's no integration. We've got ghettos all over this area, there's children that are starving, people can't mix, you're not allowed to speak to somebody. You've got poor girls in the Asian community that are being sold to people abroad to get them into the country. We fought for years for women's rights, to be able to wear what we want, equal pay. And the thing that angers most is that we've now got a whole society of men that have no respect for females, and yet females have fought for years to be able to wear what we want, do what we want, live an independent life.*
- *Yes, there were communities that do keep themselves to themselves, and I believe that's always been the case, but they still contributed to the wider society, to the community as a whole.*
- *They just want to do what they want to do, don't they? They don't want to live like we live. They want to be here, and like being Westernized, but they want to live their own life like they used to do.*

6. TECHNOLOGY

Reflecting on contemporary British society, every focus group inevitably strayed into discussions about technology and its power over social relationships, the economy, and its alienating influence on older citizens. Many felt uncomfortable having to adjust to automated bank tellers, supermarket checkouts and online banking, and felt they were being left behind by society as it moved forward without them. They reported craving the 'human contact' of the pre-digital era, and were hesitant to imagine how 'people like them' would fare in the digital economy of the future. While some participants, particularly those of higher socio-economic status, were optimistic about technological innovation, many felt it was responsible for eroding community feeling and encouraging selfishness.

- *If you don't get in touch with technology, you just get left behind and that's it.*
- *Now there's probably another industrial revolution but it's IT-led, and it's just everything is different...it's like, if you don't get on top of technology, you just get left out.*
- *If you had a problem, you had a bill. Now it's like, oh why don't you go on the internet and, press this website and blah blah, and I'm thinking 'I want to talk to a human please!' And it's like press 1, press 2, press 955! No, I want to talk to a human!*
- *There's all of the hacking into your bank accounts and all that, but everyone's telling me that you can't do anything unless you do it online. Someone told me I can't have any furniture in my home unless I go online and pay for it, so say I've got a computer, but then how do I do it?*
- *[In the past] you would go into a shop and you see, someone would serve you, bring it up on the till, and they would say, 'Have a nice day'.*
- *You know you can't speak to someone face-to-face everything is online, self-check-out, even in the pound shop now. The pound shop are doing it!*
- *Technology – that is the people in power, the ones who control our lives, whether we like it or not.*
- *They've got access to far more information. Technology has the power to control our lives completely and people in power, and it's only a very small group of people who actually run the country realistically, and it's not politicians, it's not Government, it's financiers, they run the country. And they have access to so much more about us than we realise, a lot more.*
- *They don't consider the older people, who have never had computers and have no idea. And at our age, you don't want to be trying to do things.*
- *You've got to hold on [to keep up with technology]. It's like water-skiing, you know, hold on and try and keep on there, as once you drop off you're left far behind. And this is what's happening, there's a gap between those that are keeping up with it and those that aren't.*
- *You know [now], it's just you and your smart phone really. And [...] you're like well I don't have to help anybody and nobody can help me, and that's how the view is and it makes it more difficult to address these kind of societal problems.*

- *At the office, we have a communal kitchen and nobody talks. Everyone is just on a phone. You know, I mean I sell technology but when I go in there I want to have a chat with somebody! You've been working all morning in the office... and it would be nice to chat to people but nobody wants to chat, everyone is just on their Facebook.*

It was widely discussed in many focus groups that young people are afflicted by a lack of respect and discipline, and that their obsession with technology risks creating "a nation of isolationists".

- *I think we've lost the art of conversation; when all the children are on the bus none of them are talking.*
- *They will never have the same childhood as I did. Kids used to play outside, now it's all gadgets.*
- *I think children don't actually communicate with each other, do they? When I was a kid, we went out and played, all the kids on the street would go and play together. Nowadays, kids don't even go out.*
- *There's more mental health issues now amongst teenagers, school children, than there's ever been. That's because of social media.*

7. POLITICS

The focus groups evidenced considerable hostility towards politicians as a collective group, although many individual leaders themselves were not greeted with such profound disdain. There was a clear sense of disapproval for the professionalisation of political pathways, which is seen to have disconnected them from the concerns of ordinary people: the phrase 'career politicians' was frequently employed in a pejorative sense. Overall, we witnessed an entrenched sense of antipathy towards the political classes, and a common feeling that the country is lacking decisive government.

- *I think financially, we are at the good place, there is a lot of development going on at the moment, houses are being built and people are spending money. But in my opinion, we are lacking leadership as a country.*
- *We are limping, limping along I think, and that goes back to the crash of 2008, and we never recovered from that. Maybe the seeds were sown, and then Brexit occurred and the state of our economy is such that there is just not enough money in the pot to pay for all the things we expect to be provided for us.*
- *There's such a mode of apathy at the moment and despondency with the Government. The fact that no one believes that they're going to do anything for the country anymore.*
- *There's a lot of people that are a lot worse off at the moment and I think obviously what's going on at the moment with the negotiations with Brexit, the Government taken its eye off the ball really and not putting the care into what's needed for people at the grassroots level.*
- *None of them have done a day's job, then [they've] gone into the trade unions, then gone from trade unions to be a Member of Parliament. They don't do nothing for us.*
- *They are literally in ivory towers in Westminster...it's frightening. They are completely aloof left and right.*
- *There's a lot of people in positions [of power] judging aspects of life that they've never experienced. They said we're all in this together, and they've got their noses in the trough ripping off the expenses and it's us lower beings that have got the runt of it. It's always been the case.*
- *My local politician, I've written to him three times on three different subjects and every answer I have got was 'I'm sorry, I can't help you'. And you think 'Hang on a minute, what are they paying you for?' And there weren't difficult questions!*
- *I am worried about the fact that we have such a weak Government. And the fact that we have such a dangerous opposition leader who really scares me.*
- *Hopefully, after the Brexit, we will get some strong leadership within politics. And I do think that we will be better off, but at the moment, it's a bit muddy.*

Politicians were also accused of having eschewed cross-party collaboration in favour of partisanship. Many participants would clearly favour greater efforts from the major parties to work together on the big issues facing Britain.

- *With the politicians we have, personally, I don't believe 90% what they tell us and [they are] confusing us by telling us, 'one party says...this party says...'. They constantly contradict each other!*
- *There are just so many petty arguments back and forwards regardless of whether you voted Remain or Out, but this just looks so childish. You realise how much all parties are alike.*
- *Now, they just care about themselves and their own policies.*
- *It's just about scoring points and not about working together for the country as a whole.*

Particularly in the North-East of England, politicians were often derided as untrustworthy, London-centric and disconnected from the concerns of ordinary working people.

- *You take your Ministers and that, and they're preaching one thing and not doing anything [...] They're fibbing left, right and centre you know.*
- *Politicians don't believe there's anything else outside of London.*
- *Politicians should be like, looking into ways to getting our town put back on the map, bringing jobs in, but they're all just sitting on their backs, they're not bothered about our city. We're just a laughing stock at the moment because there is nothing here.*
- *The Tories down London have no clue about people up here, 'cause obviously we can't survive on what we're living on in the North can we?*

Politicians were also described in terms that implied a sense of endemic corruption within the political system, exploiting their positions of power to take advantage of hardworking citizens.

- *It feels like the Government are saying there's too many people on these benefits and we need to cut money but then there's no plan. That's how it feels. So there is an out-of-touchness.*
- *The current Government [...] numbers need crunching and changing, but they don't take the human cost into that, so there is a lack of understanding.*
- *[politicians being out of touch] It's probably on some level the way it's always been, but it's just worse now.*
- *They're robbers, they're robbers. They're only for themselves.*
- *They promise you everything, until they get in power, until they get in position and then you don't exist.*
- *All their interests are to line their own pockets, the politicians.*
- *You know, if you watch these debates in parliament [...] they play around with figures. So Labour plays around with these figures and they sound good, then the Conservatives play around with these figures and they sound good.*

When asked their views about specific politicians, there were surprisingly mixed feelings about many of them, but perceived empathy was consistently highlighted as a crucial characteristic for leaders across all ends of the political spectrum. It is worth mentioning that citizens could generally only recall a handful of politicians' names; aside from the Prime Minister and Jeremy Corbyn, these were: Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage and, to some extent, Jacob Rees-Mogg.

| Jacob Rees-Mogg | Nigel Farage | Boris Johnson |
|---|--|--|
| <p>Rees-Mogg comes across a tough Tory, but I think he's clued in to more everyday things.</p> <p>Even though he [Rees-Mogg] comes across as being black and white, he does actually have open mind.</p> <p>He's [Rees-Mogg] very family-oriented. He's English, you would say English, he solidifies 'Englishness'. He's very intelligent.</p> | <p>Nigel Farage is down to earth - he says as it is and he speaks the truth, he don't pull punches.</p> <p>Farage tells the truth and don't sugar coat it.</p> | <p>When Boris Johnson comes on the television, I just turn off.</p> <p>I think he's [Johnson] from a very privileged background so I don't think he'd really be able to communicate or make contact with me.</p> <p>He [Johnson] comes across as being really silly doesn't he? But some of the things he says are actually quite good.</p> <p>I think it would be worrying if Boris Johnson were Prime Minister considering that we got Trump on the other side of the Atlantic</p> <p>I'd vote for Boris Johnson, because at least he's an idiot and we can have a laugh. I know he's probably completely out of touch and he is a bit of a buffoon. But he is quite smart, and I would much prefer him than anyone else I can think of.</p> |

Theresa May incites quite a high level of sympathy for her position, and a sense that she is not being adequately supported by her colleagues. But others were less convinced of whether she was genuine in her claim to want to tackle 'burning injustices', and participants consistently expressed both confusion and frustration at having been asked to head to the polls again in June 2017.

- *They'll all stab her in the back, instead of getting behind her and saying, right what are we doing this week?*
- *I just don't like this Prime Minister. I just think she's totally out of touch with people. Just terrible! She just comes across as weirdly sinister.*
- *I actually don't mind Theresa May; I think she's actually quite nice.*
- *She's been better than I thought she'd be. I thought she'd be the same old as Maggie Thatcher.*

- *I don't know why she did, why she had the election and that, I don't really understand what that was about you know.*
- *Everything right now has been exacerbated by Mrs May calling for an election that was totally unnecessary.*
- *I think at least with Theresa May at least she was willing to take the job on. She seems to have a bit of backbone, don't she?*
- *She's not the best of leaders but then again there's not that much around.*

There is also no clear consensus of views on **Jeremy Corbyn**, who is equally regarded as a champion of working people and lacking the essential qualities to be an appropriate statesman of office. Critical participants also frequently pointed to his "privileged background", accusing him of masquerading as a 'man of the people', and highlighted his perceived backtracking on student fees as evidence of his charlatanism.

- *Jeremy Corbyn appears to be more in touch with things, his heart's in the right place.*
- *You need to actually sit down and talk to Jeremy Corbyn and listen to what he has actually got to say. Just because you believe in social rights doesn't mean you're a looney. They always say that, looney left, just because you believe in people, workers' rights.*
- *Jeremy Corbyn, he comes from a privileged background really, but he tries to...portray the working class. [...] And a lot of people were sucked in by that weren't they really?*
- *He [Corbyn] supports the IRA, terrorist groups, unsavoury countries. God forbid he should ever get in.*
- *Jeremy Corbyn frightens me to death, because he comes from a very privileged background and he says what he thinks he needs to say to get people to vote for him. A lot of people are like that, most of them... I think they're all utterly clueless.*
- *Corbyn was promising the Earth to the students... And then it would cost billions and billions and billions and then he realised he couldn't afford it.*
- *Immediately after the election was over, he completely backed out. He would have never scrapped the tuition fees.*
- *I am Jewish. And the worry about his beliefs and his allies with various, you know, anti-Semitic parties. Which he denies, I know. But, you know, at the end of the day - he is worrying. Not just from a religious point of view, but I just think, from all sorts of points of view.*
- *The younger people, they flocked to a new messiah and Mr Corbyn has provided everything they thought they wanted, or he says he has provided everything they thought they wanted – but they possibly haven't thought it out, because they haven't involved themselves in politics, in finance. in what realities there are in life*

8. EUROPE AND BREXIT

None of the focus groups actively prompted participants regarding Europe and Brexit, but these topics inevitably became a primary focus of discussion. Participants increasingly self-described, and often introduced themselves, by their voting position in the Referendum, demonstrating just how critical it has become to perceptions of identity.

Britain clearly remains a tremendously divided country, and the rhetoric of the media and political sphere has seeped heavily into citizens' language and perceptions. We saw anguish, frustration and deep concerns on both sides, bound up in a significant level of confusion and misinformation. Central to these anxieties on both sides is a mistrust of Government to both deliver on citizens' wishes, but also to protect them from the myriad risks they understandably feel ill-equipped to foresee.

On the topic of Brexit, the language in focus groups can quickly become highly emotive and even aggressive at times, although we did observe a strong 'socialising' effect whereby the most confident members would often reassure the most hesitant to allay their concerns, although not necessarily with factual information.

Some Leavers urged a firm hand from the Government:

- *The wavering people, I think they should be held for treason because they're undermining everything the British values. I don't think Brexit will happen, there'll be too much opposition against it [from the elites].*

While many Remainers, and even some Leavers, were concerned that doubling down on Brexit after a relatively marginal result was creating unnecessary chasms between citizens:

- *[The Brexit result] was 48 per cent to 52 per cent, and then they're like saying it's the will of the people because 52 per cent of people said one thing and 48 per cent the other. And that's a four per cent difference, and that's not enough to say, let's just clean smash the whole thing through!*
- *It's obviously split, and Brexit was the majority, but the amount of majority wasn't huge, and it really showed a split throughout the country. And whatever is going to happen is going to pit mind against mind all the way through.*

Many parents expressed regrets at the rifts Brexit had provoked within their families, with the children of some Leave voters bewildered and furious about their decision.

- *My son was absolutely livid. He texted me to say, "I hope you are happy now".*

Due to the nature of the demographics predominant in our focus groups (generally White British, a large number of over-50s, many participants from low socio-economic backgrounds), Leave voters were over-represented in our focus groups. On the subject of the European Union itself, it is certainly the case that the animosity towards regulations impacting health and safety, energy efficiency and 'acceptable produce' has endured well beyond the Referendum campaign, although there was a considerable level of misinformation about many of these.

- *When my granddaughter goes to dancing class, she's only four and she's not allowed to go in the same dressing room for people above five without having a chaperone there. There's got to be chaperones there. Now, that's come from European law, it's come from that*
- *You can't even smack your own child now. That's all come from the EU.*
- *All that focus on minorities. That's because we're in Europe.*

The narrative of 'taking back control' has also seeped deeply into many citizens' minds, and there was some optimism about Brexit from those keen to restore sovereignty they perceive to have been infringed.

- *We can get our country back, because being in the EU has done nothing for us. Completely a waste of space.*
- *The EU is run by dictators.*
- *We wanna get our own country back, make our rules, be our own people again, instead of being dictated to [about] what can do what we can't do. The shape of the fruit and all that nonsense.*
- *We were being swamped by Europe, and our identity was being taken from us.*

Germany was repeatedly singled out for criticism for being perceived to attempt to exert dominance over Britain, in retribution for the Allied victory in the Second World War.

- *I think a lot of the finicky little things you've gotta do, you know, the health and safety things...it's way over the top. [It's coming from] Germany who think they've won the war by imposing the EU, the Euro on the people.*
- *It just seemed a little bit futile for so many lives to have been lost in wars, to have been absorbed by the same people that we were fighting against. I know that's history, but what was the point of it all if we were just going to give into it?*

While expressing disdain for European law-making, a number of participants also claimed that Britain was unique in the diligence it paid to EU legislation and diktats, compared to other EU member states. Ultimately, Britain was often described as fundamentally, irreconcilably culturally different from Europe.

- *There's only one country that follows the letter of the law and that's us, we're the only one.*
- *I was in Italy a couple of years ago and I was in a hotel, and the waiter served curly cucumbers, and he looked at me and he smiled and he said 'Yes, it is only the British that have straight cucumbers'. What it tends to be is: because we are a very honourable nation, what everybody says, we have to get along with the rules, we actually play by the rules. Nobody else does!*
- *When you get to the most European countries, Spain etc., very few people pay taxes, whereas in this country, the majority of people do.*

- *We are the one country in Europe that because we're British we do what we're supposed to do, so we follow every single rule that they send out. If the French didn't like it, they just have a demonstration and forget about it. The Italians don't like it, they ignore it and have a glass of wine. It's the way we've always been, we do what we're told.*
- *We've got a different approach to life, a different attitude, and I find it difficult to consider myself as a European.*
- *We have a completely different culture than Europe. We are separated by seas. It is as simple as that. We have completely different culture.*

18 months after the vote, we were interested to observe some quite profound anxieties regarding a fall in immigration – specifically because many Leave voters are themselves employed in vocations highly dependent on migrant workers.

- *I work in administration at a university, and they are quite worried about it they keep having whole sessions for international students. But it's not just that, it's research money, grants. Apparently they're worried that they're going to lose quite a lot of money.*
- *We have a farm, and so many of our workers are from Eastern Europe. I don't know what I'll do if they stop coming. They won't stop coming, will they?*
- *I don't know – should we be worried? We get a load of money from overseas students, don't we?*
- *Now they're saying immigration is good for our economy, and what are we going to do if they don't come? I didn't ever think immigration would go down. The Government always says it will.*
- *That's what people thought we were voting for [immigration to fall], but it ain't gonna happen.*

Leave Voters and the Brexit Negotiations

Over the course of these focus groups, we observed the emergence of three clear schools of thought amongst Leave voters about the Brexit negotiations and Britain's future after Brexit: those who remain tremendously buoyant about Brexit and its opportunities; those who are increasingly concerned with the process of negotiations and becoming somewhat anxious about its material impacts; and those who are regretful about their decision to vote Leave.

Group 1. Optimists

Some Leave voters remain optimistic about the outcome, convinced that market forces will fall in Britain's favour. These citizens tended to be very focused on financial contributions to the EU, feeling the UK had gained little 'value for money' from membership, and often repeated claims that the EU was 'punishing' the UK as a deterrent to other member states.

- *At the end of the day, are people going to stop buying cars? Are people going to stop buying BMWs?*

- *If you look at London - London is the main financial centre in the world. And it's staying. It's going to stay that way. If you look at the UK as a whole, if you want to be in medicine, you have to be able to speak English. If you want to be an engineer, you have to be able to speak English. You want to fly a plane, you want to be a pilot, you have to be able to speak English. We have so much influence across the world.*
- *Brussels don't want other countries thinking actually, the UK got a decent deal, we'll do it.*
- *Europe has been difficult about us leaving because of that, because they think that once we've left, we've set a precedent and other countries will start thinking 'Oh, we'd like to do that'.*
- *Obviously we still want a close relationship with Europe, those are our closest allies, but if you go back to the last major war, World War II, the majority of those European countries were actually enemies. They weren't our friends, they were our enemies and they still turned on us. And to this day, it's happening, they turn on us. Take the Eurovision song contest - no one is ever going to vote for us.*
- *I thought how much are we paying now, to be in it, and then I thought how much better we would be if we came out of it. And I think we'd be better if we came out of it, because it works out as £14 million a week.*
- *We are also the largest financial contributor. They can't afford to lose us.*
- *[The UK's EU contributions] I think it also goes a lot to other countries, like you know these third world countries.*
- *We're already giving loads of money and they don't seem to be doing anything with it. It goes in their back pockets and I think that's the problem.*

These Leavers are also incredibly positive about Britain's trade prospects, and were placing a huge amount of emphasis on large-scale deals being secured quickly. Their rationalisation of many aspects of the current uncertainty depends on Britain triumphantly superseding its current trade relationship with Europe. These discussions revealed that many participants remain unaware of the trade-offs inherent in trade negotiations, such as food standards and immigration, and are convinced that the UK has 'secretly' been making strong advancements on trade discussions with non-EU countries.

- *I think we'll be unsteady for a few years after Brexit, but then after that when we can start trading with big countries like China and America without asking permission, I think the country will be much better.*
- *I think there is a lot of scaremongering by the media, to say you know companies are leaving the UK, going other places but I think you're right that people are making those deals now.*
- *They'd have you believe that it takes years to sort out these deals because America has been negotiating with the EU for donkey's years. I think dealing with 27 countries is impossible sometimes, but when you're dealing with one nation to one nation, it's easier.*
- *They're already talking, they're already talking about it [trade negotiations with America] now in terms of how it's gonna work.*

- *As soon as you get the trade deals forged things will stabilise.*
- *I think you'll find out, we can organise trading with other parts of the world, 'cause that's what we've always done really. We didn't need Europe. We don't need people drawing us into a little bubble.*

While some participants noted that prices in supermarkets are increasing – especially those for whom an additional 30p does not go unnoticed – many of these most optimistic Leave voters continue to feel defiant about the relationship between economic hardship and their vote for Brexit. They described a naturally cyclical British economy, which weathers 'good decades and bad decades', and were resigned to paying higher prices if it was the right course for the country.

- *Things have always gone up, it's like fuel. It's natural.*
- *You just live with it don't you really? You shop around, don't you?*
- *It'll go up anyway, you can't stop it can you really?*
- *It's a bad thing for the City, but a good thing for the country, coming out.*

Some participants even wondered whether consumer price increases were being encouraged by European Governments to punish Britain for leaving.

- *It's like a bullying tactic, ain't it? Put the prices up and then you might change your mind.*

Group 2. Frustrated and Anxious

These Leave voters still hold quite negative perceptions of the EU, but the process of the negotiations and the increasing awareness of personal economic impacts are beginning to make them hesitant about the outcome of Brexit. They are now considerably less certain that we will 'make a success' of Brexit, and their anger appears to be largely directed towards the Government.

- *We still don't know what's gonna happen with Brexit, we still don't know how much we're gonna have to pay, so we are at the bit of state of flux at the moment. So there is a pattern of uncertainty.*

These participants expressed frustrations with the pace of Brexit negotiations, having expected the vote would result in swift action.

- *I just think it's taking forever, it doesn't seem to be moving forward. You know we had this Brexit, we decided as a country we were going to do this and then two years down the line and where are we? We don't seem to be moving forward.*
- *Brussels are demanding too much...[...] There's a lot of things which are slowing the whole process within this country and also in Brussels, and that's the main problem at the moment.*

They are also outraged that little preparation had been made within the Government for Brexit contingency planning.

- *They weren't prepared for everyone to vote out and they didn't have any plans, as far as I could see, of what was going to happen.*
- *I think even as a Government they expected to Remain, and between them sort of at the moment it just seems, well they seem scared.*
- *They didn't have any plan or anything of what they were going to do if they all voted out.*
- *One of the greatest failings of our politicians was not to be prepared for a possible Brexit. They had no plan. I can't conceive of these supposedly highly educated people, who gave the public a Referendum, and they didn't think that just maybe they would lose.*
- *They [the Government] are trying to implement something that they didn't want, they didn't expect, and now they have got to make it happen. The whole situation is just an absolute mess, it's a frighteningly stupid mess and it should have been anticipated.*

Group 3. Regretful

This series of focus groups distinctly captured an emergent sense of regret amongst a relatively significant proportion of Leave voters. We saw a growing anger at having been forced to take such a momentous decision, without sufficient understanding of the consequences. Many of these participants challenged the purpose of a referendum such as this in a Parliamentary democracy, feeling it was too complex and beyond the remit of citizens. They perceive the negotiations are not playing in Britain's favour, and are becoming acutely fearful about the future.

- *It's obvious, there are more factors that need considering than what we actually thought it would be the case at first I think, and there's a lot of difficult decisions to be made.*
- *It's going to be really up and down...there're going to be a lot of problems.*
- *Nobody told us we were gonna have to pay £50 billion! Nobody said a word about that.*
- *I haven't got the knowledge of the financial implications, in us staying or leaving and I would guess that most people would agree.*
- *They never asked the right questions – just, do you want to leave or not, and that was the end of it.*
- *I don't think anybody knew, or had an idea of the complexities of it. We're all like yeah, it's a good idea, but then businesses started getting involved and saying hang on this is gonna cost a lot of money and then all of a sudden we were like, oh what are we gonna do now?*
- *To be perfectly honest, I don't think there should have been a referendum anyway on a subject as complex as that. I don't think the public had enough knowledge of for and against.*

- *I thought we voted for politicians to actually make these decisions on our behalf!*
- *With due respect, we didn't know what the full picture was, nobody still even knows now. That's half the problem isn't it?*
- *We were absolutely not in a position where we should have been given the vote in the first place.*
- *They asked us to vote on something which, the majority of us, had no real knowledge on what we were signing. I wanted to just to come out of Europe because I thought Europe had too much control over our cards, over our system. But, I for one, didn't fully understand the implications of coming out of Europe. And I think there are a lot of people who likewise.*
- *If there was another referendum, I would suspect the vote would go the opposite way now. Because people have a better understanding. I just thought that we didn't have the knowledge and we were lied to as well.*
- *It is the headlines, like the £350 million bus, and everybody fell for the headlines, unfortunately. Then it came out that wasn't true.*
- *I voted to come out as well, but at the time we weren't told the consequences.*
- *I was to come out then...but I'm not sure I would now.*
- *I suspect some of that was because politicians didn't know either. Some of what we were not told was because they didn't know. Leaving Europe is a complete unknown because no one has done it before.*

9. BRITAIN AND THE WORLD

Despite the rhetoric during the Referendum campaign of 'Empire 2.0', there was little appetite among the focus groups for Britain to resume this approach to international engagement. Participants appeared to be pragmatic about our ambitions, in consensus that there were downsides to Britain's imperial might, and aware that a new global identity would need to be formed.

- *We're a country that used to have an Empire and be very, very important and now we're just a country, a small country. A small island in the middle of a little sea.*
- *Those from an older generation have a larger sense of pride. Whereas I see our Empire as, you know, we went and plundered the world, and took advantage of, like the Romans probably we did some good things. So I'm not ashamed of it but, I don't think it was marvellous, wonderful thing.*
- *What, when we used to rape and pillage and take other people's stuff? I don't want another Empire.*
- *We're proud of a country that was supposedly top in the world, but most of that was down to bullying and slavery. If you look at history, I'm ashamed of my history.*
- *The influence will be different rather than an empire. We controlled a lot of Africa etc. by a physical brute force and that's not a case anymore*
- *If we go back to far in history we only got rich by, what's the word, raping their countries and taking all the money from them. They're [immigrants] like what you moaning about - you're only getting your comeuppance.*

Some participants also expressed concerns about Britain's global image after Brexit.

- *I think we might be viewed as being rather racist because of that vote. I think our status, for want of a better word, has probably slipped.*

Nonetheless, it is evident that a strong sense of patriotism and national pride remains, particularly through our collective 'resilience' and our 'generosity'.

- *When you look at other places of the world, Britain's actually pretty good.*
- *The 50s, 60s, 70s 80s, 90s and it's kind of been like an Alton Tower rollercoaster and we've bounced back every time.*
- *The United Kingdom is such a diverse and richly populated country, that we can be hugely successful again waving our own flag and progressing as a total sovereign nation and not as a sovereign European country.*

When asked what makes Britain 'exceptional', there were a surprising number of references to the response to the Grenfell tragedy, which is seen by participants up and down the country as an example of community spirit and action in practice.

- *[The Blitz spirit] I think it's still underneath the surface.*
- *People rally round. I mean look at when we had all the floods, I mean they came from far and wide, didn't they, to help out. So I think whatever happens in the country, it won't be the Government that rallies – it will be the people.*
- *There still is a community spirit when there is an emergency, like with Manchester, or other crises this year.*
- *I work in safety and obviously I have loads and loads of stuff to read but there were no Government support [for Grenfell fire safety], but what happened the people, the people bounced up and sorted it out. So in that way, we have that types of pockets of resilience.*
- *We are the most generous nation in the world! Without a doubt.*
- *Compared to the other countries for example, we have the soft touch.*

Foreign Aid

A consistent theme across the focus groups was a lack of support for maintaining the extent of the UK's foreign aid budget, with participants clear this would be better directed to tackling social concerns at home. There was a strong feeling that Britain is a generous nation, and our goodwill was being taken advantage of. The phrase 'charity begins at home' was repeated in almost every focus group.

- *We need to cut foreign aid...I don't know how much it is, but it's a lot. We should put it back in our economy; it would help a lot, dealing with cutbacks on law enforcers, police, NHS and all that. So cut back on things like that, 'cause then we can use foreign aid for our aid, you know what I mean, it makes more sense.*
- *We're the first ones to put our hands in our pockets, you know, help people and all that, but now we got to worry about our own country and get back on our feet and once we have, we can start helping out again but, but we got to look at our own country first.*
- *We tend to throw a lot of money away, I mean...this foreign aid, which is absolutely ludicrous how much we give. I don't say don't give anything, but we give like 13billion pounds a year and it goes up with inflation every year, it's 0.7% of the GDP, so you know that could be put to the NHS, it could be given to pensioners you know, and I think it's horrific and yet there's no Government prepared to do anything about it, 'cause it's set in stone?*
- *I think personally we do need to help but I think it's excessive at the moment*
- *I think we should put more into our own country. Do they give us anything when anything happens over here? We're self-sufficient, we sort of, you know the bombings, we rectified all that didn't we? We didn't get any aid from outside countries. The fire early on this year at Grenfell Tower, did they help us with that?*
- *Charity should be at home. We're the second biggest money givers in the world, but we're not as big as everybody else though are we? We're even beating Germany and France and people like this and people actually in the EU have actually cut down on foreign aid. Because they can't afford it, but we just continue to give.*

Notes

Demos conducted a large series of focus groups around England between October and December 2017. Participants ranged in age from young adults to the elderly, with the vast majority aged between 50 and 70 years. Discussions were held in blocks of 90 – 120 minutes, and explored participants' views on a range of topics about contemporary Britain – particularly around politics, the economy and society.

Participants were provided with incentives to support their involvement in the project. All contributions have been thoroughly anonymised to protect their identities and to encourage an open and honest discussion.

The project, *At Home in One's Past*, is exploring the contemporary political and cultural manifestations of nostalgia across five European countries: the UK, France, Germany, Spain and Italy. The full report, including the non-UK research, will be published later in 2018.

For further information, please visit www.demos.co.uk or contact the project lead, on sophie.gaston@demos.co.uk.

Sophie Gaston

Sophie leads international projects and partnerships at Demos, overseeing research and events on global political trends and social change. She is particularly focused on the topics of populism, citizenship, liberalism and the relationship between media and politics. Her research currently focuses on comparative international insights across Europe and the United States, with a particular emphasis on in-depth qualitative research with citizens.