# Brexit, Megxit and a Pop Culture:

## What does this mean for the English school system in 2020 and beyond?

First a geopolitical lesson (should you need one).  Great Britain consists of the countries of Scotland, Wales and England and the union only becomes the United Kingdom when Northern Ireland is added to the mix.



## Brexit

Only England and Wales have common school regulations, although Wales also enjoys having a devolved government for some issues relating to social policies (including schooling).   So, when we consider Brexit it means all four countries are due to leave the European Community (EC) at the end of January, 2020 (having been members since 1973 of what is now a 28 country economic community).



The consequences of leaving are yet to be perceived, let alone classified, as each of the four UK countries is liable to respond differently.  Scotland, for example, voted strongly in favour of 'Remain' in the EC referendum of 2016 and in the general election of December 2019 returned an almost complete set of members of parliament (MPs) who will represent the Scottish National Party (SNP) at the House of Commons in Westminster.  Not surprisingly, there is a strong call from within the country for a further referendum for their independence (having had a previous one in 2014 in which just over 55 per cent voted against independence and to stay in the union).  Meanwhile, the conflict between Catholic and Unionist factions in Northern Ireland continues, with devolved power

only having recently been restored for the first time since 2017 following agreement between the UK and the Republic of Ireland.  In Wales the Labour party retains an overall majority yet not only lost some eight per cent of the votes, but also large parts of the principality to the Conservative party.  Similar losses were felt by Labour in England with control of previous strongholds, particularly in the North, passing to the Conservative party for the first time.

## Consequences

The likelihood is situation is not only a divided union, but also one in England that sees a strong desire to ensure that the underpinning principles of Brexit are enacted with so much of the country now aligning behind the newly elected Conservative government.  The challenge for those charged with delivering a state funded school system, however, is that no-one (including those in government) knows what Brexit means.  The general election, it appears, was fought and won on the rhetoric of 'Get Brexit Done', an oft repeated mantra from the victorious Conservative party who nevertheless systematically failed to signal precisely what this would mean in terms of policy and practice.   Politics and policies, it seems, have descended into the maelstrom of pop culture perhaps best illustrated at the time of writing by excessive media interest in the planned change of lifestyle and location for Prince Harry and his wife Meghan (Markle) which has been labelled 'MEGXIT'.



## Megxit and a pop culture.

A focus of attention of this type has led to the scenario where major crises and incidents across the globe, such as the recent floods in Indonesia or riots in Iraq, are seemingly less important to a pop culture typified by people known as 'influencers' whose only claim to power is notoriety, often manifested through social media.  The people, it seems, are of greater importance than any elected politician who, in turn, seem to be following the Donald J Trump route of announcing policy and justifying themselves on Twitter (or other similar platforms).  Following their recent 'disastrous'[1] result in the general election, for example, the Labour party have begun the process of electing a new leader with the early discourse featuring statements such as 'we have never heard of X candidate' – in other words, these candidates have to become known to the general public in order to become party leader.

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[1] The Conservative party only increased their share of the vote by 1.2%, but their number of MPS rose by 47 whilst Labour lost only 8% of the vote, but lost 59 seats (650 is total number of seats available).

The effect on policy is similar, with the consequence we have been variously been told (mainly via soundbites and social media postings) that Brexit is about controlling our borders and immigration, determining our own laws, freeing up massive funding for the National Health Service and being able to strike new trade deals across the world free from the bureaucracy of the EU.  We are yet to discover whether any or all of these are true, but while we await the outcome of continuing deliberations and fallout from Brexit in England there is a vacuum of policy generation and enactment relating to the school system.



## Schools in England

For reasons illustrated above, I can only talk about the English school system at this point as the other three countries have already chose different paths.  The English system has become and continues to be a casualty of neoliberalist policies, initially engaged in the UK by Conservative governments led by Margaret Thatcher and sustained over the intervening years by various politicians, most notably in recent times by Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education 2011-14.

It was Mr Gove who continued the allegedly desired devolution of central government power, contained within the commonly accepted construct of neoliberalism, to practitioner level through a series of policies which were 'liberal' and encouraged the development of a school-led system in England which would enhance improvement and student attainment.  It was, and as demonstrated by several commentators, less the granting of liberty than steering at a distance through control of funding and the imposition of high stakes accountability.  Nevertheless, the illusion of 'freeing' up schools through limiting the control of local authorities and establishing schools as charitable companies, answerable directly to central government, provided the platform.  Under the Academies Act of 2011 thousands of schools took the leap to be apply for state-funded independence as stand-alone academies, free schools, or university technical colleges.  What was missing, however, was direction and control.  What was important in England, it seemed, was to provide the chance to develop schooling in a conflicting libertarian and local authority-free environment.

## Policy in Action

As policy, however, the principle of school-led reform was all we got and there seem to be parallels with Brexit i.e. we know what we don't want, but we are yet to specify what we do want!   It is worth noting at this point that Michael Gove was also one of the major proponents of the 'Leave' campaign in the 2016 referendum and, despite running against Boris Johnson in the Conservative party leadership campaign of 2019, served as 'Minister for No-Deal Brexit' on the appointment of Johnson as Prime Minister.   There may be a coincidence there?



What we have as a consequence of Mr Gove's efforts as major contributor, however, is the current situation whereby just about a half of all children of school age in England are in the academy sector, which is largely exempt from local democracy.  By creating academy trusts (i.e. companies that have special taxable status under company law) the school system has evolved to the point where governance is primarily in the hands of non-elected trustees, meaning that it possible for schools and groups of schools to be managed without statutory control, local democracy and parental engagement.   This is in contrast to the shift toward individual governing bodies for each state-maintained school during the last century which culminated in the 1986 Education Act (No. 2) where governance was to be shared between local authorities, parent representatives and the teacher workforce.  Whilst such governing bodies worked within a framework of legislation and central policies, decision-making was at the individual school level and workable because of devolution of funding set up by the Education Reform Act of 1988.

The following three decades saw the laudable objective of individual school governing bodies eroded to the point where invariably schools, becoming charitable trusts as standalone or multi-academy trusts, have seceded this ambition and evolved into free-standing organisations without specified

purpose.  So, just as in the case of a society driven by 'pop culture', we find schools, federations of schools, academies and multi-academy trusts aligning themselves to populist and readily available ambitions.   Want to be successful?  Then get great student scores on test results and show that you are contributing to the desire to move the nation further up the international rankings such as TIMMS and PEARLS!



## English school system in 2020 and beyond?

Interested in student well-being and development of rounded human beings who will be the adults of the future?  Forget it, for in the absence of state directed governance all schools, federations of schools, academies and multi-academy trusts in England are prone to being directed by factors that are not in the best interest of the student body they are supposed to serve.  Instead we have a school 'system' whereby half the children are placed in independent state-maintained organisations that are answerable to company law and their source of funding (the Education and Skills Funding Agency), whilst the other half languish in maintained schools managed by local authorities who have effectively been stripped of all power and resources.  What do they all do in their quest for survival is to try to improve test scores and protect themselves from the ogre of the national inspection service.  Meanwhile, left largely alone because of the difference in regulations and structure, the Scottish schools system has developed a [Curriculum for Excellence](#), which firmly focused on the needs of the child and young person and designed to enable them to develop the four capacities of becoming: successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. In the absence of similar initiative in England the schooling system is in hands of people who have to guess how they will be judged (and supported) in an age where social media and policy vagueness co-exist.  Let's hope they have secure moral purpose!