



*Prof. Dr. Paul J.J. Welfens,*

*Präsident des Europäischen Instituts für Internationale Wirtschaftsbeziehungen (EIIW) an der Bergischen Universität Wuppertal; Lehrstuhl Makroökonomik und Jean Monnet Professor für Europäische Wirtschaftsintegration an der Bergischen Universität Wuppertal, Rainer-Gruenter-Str. 21, D-42119 Wuppertal; Alfred Grosser Professorship 2007/08, Sciences Po, Paris, Research Fellow, IZA, Bonn; Non-Resident Senior Fellow at AICGS/Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC; eingeladener Experte u.a. bei der UN, IWF, Deutscher Bundestag, BNetzA, Europäisches Parlament, EZB, US Senat*

0202 439 1371 [welfens@eiiw.uni-wuppertal.de](mailto:welfens@eiiw.uni-wuppertal.de) , [www.eiiw.eu](http://www.eiiw.eu)

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## **Pitfalls in the British EU Referendum and their Consequences**

Democracy means that the will of the majority should be respected and thus BREXIT should be realized – this was the key message of many speeches and tweets of Prime Minister Johnson in August 2019. He would indeed have a strong point here had the British decision in 2016 resulted in a clear majority in an orderly referendum. The June 23 vote indeed showed a 51.9% majority in support of BREXIT, however the referendum was disorderly if one takes the 2014 Scottish independence referendum as a benchmark in terms of the quality of government information: The Cameron government informed the Scottish electorate in an information brochure that every Scot would lose GBP 1400 in the long run and all the benefits of British EU membership. Two years later, the following Cameron government also sent an information brochure to all households across the UK, but it did not contain a single word on the findings of the Treasury Report that a negotiated exit from the EU would mean a GBP 1800 loss of per capita income, and more if one would include the forgone benefits of Cameron's negotiation with the EU in early 2016. With this information, the referendum would have ended with a 51.9% majority for Remain as can be calculated using standard UK popularity functions which indicate the link between economic growth and government popularity.

It is still quite opaque as to exactly why the Cameron government did not provide this important information to voters, but there are arguments that there was no clear majority for BREXIT. If this is the case, there is no clear basis for a British government to push for BREXIT – and certainly not for a No-Deal BREXIT. The question of adequate information is not some benign issue in a historical referendum. Giving true information on the effects of EU is, as officially documented, not a strong side of Mr. Boris Johnson - this became apparent in the referendum campaign of 2016 when he repeatedly publicly explained that the National Health Service could, post-BREXIT, receive 250 million GBP more per week, namely the UK contribution to the EU. However, this gross contribution figure was more than twice as high as the relevant British net contribution to the EU. The gross figure would never be available to the NHS since the general expectation is that any UK government would have to replace the current EU funding for UK regions, firms and university projects post-BREXIT from the national budget. Sir David Norgrove, the head of the UK Statistics Authority wrote a letter on September 17, 2017, to the then Foreign Minister Johnson who had repeated the 250 million figure in an op-ed in the Daily Telegraph and wrote that he considered it disappointing that

these figures, confusing net and gross payments, had been repeated by Johnson and that this stood for a “misuse of official statistics”.

The British Parliament needs the opportunity to look into the critical issue of adequate information standards in the 2016 referendum. Naturally, Parliament should decide which conclusion to draw from this. Parliament could, for example, decide to have a referendum on the question of holding a second EU referendum which is a new option. Or it could simply organize a second referendum and take responsibility for this.

One can certainly argue that the EU needs reform and that the European Parliament should have a greater role in EU politics by receiving the right to initiate legislation, independent of the EU Commission. However, the arguments for EU membership in 1973 when the UK joined the Community are even stronger today: Better opportunities for more trade and foreign direct investment, having a strong influence at the EU table in Brussels and using the EU as a power platform to pursue national interests, jointly with partner countries, in the world economy.

*Prof. Dr. Paul JJ Welfens, President of EIW/University of Wuppertal and Chair in Macroeconomics; author of An Accidental BREXIT, London: Palgrave (140K downloads EN/GE)*

