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-Imagining Brexit as a

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classes, natural supporters of the Cons

the University of California in the late 1960s (noted by Churchman 1967), followed by a seminal paper (Rittel and Webber 1973) cited by all subsequent writers on wicked problems.

Rittel and Webber (1973) wrote about dilemmas and challenges in the field of urban

insufficient policing this is not an exhaustive list. A wicked problem is bi-directionally

example of crime, it can, as mentioned above, be linked to broader causal problems such as poverty or inequality and also downstream to the crisis in
(arrest and imprisonment) is pursued. Thus, given the difficulty of finding a solution to a wicked problem, any

responsibility to solve, either as multiple individuals acting in concert, or as social groups, or via the democratic process.
tackle the problem or some kind of plebiscite or referendum.

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links to other problems such as poverty and residential overcrowding suggest that it should be categorised as a super-wicked problem. On the other hand, the fact that there does potentially exist a range of scientific and social measures to overcome the challenge social distancing, quarantining, mass testing, intensive care and the chance of an effective vaccine indicates a -

Chronology of Brexit

the 2015 election, which they won by a clear margin to give them an absolute majority (prior to that they had been in a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats). The manifesto contained a pledge to hold a referendum on EU membership before the end of 2017. This was a tactical ploy to pacify stop the rising anti-EU populism of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) under the vocal leadership of Nigel Farage which, although not represented in the UK national Parliament, succeeded in electing a slew of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) in the 2012 European elections.

In truth, the origins of the Brexit vote lie further back in history. I suggest that they reside in three domains: in several decades of inner turmoil in the Conservative Party over the issue of Europe; in long-
the world which still resided in the minds of many, mainly older, members of the population; and in the widening socio-economic and spatial divi -
crisis of 2008. I come back to a more nuanced interpretation of the multi-layered meaning of Brexit a little later.

The referendum was announced by the then Prime Minister David Cameron in February 2016 in the belief that the vote to stay in the EU would be won and that the Europhobic critics would be defeated. Between February and June the discursive and tactical battle-lines were drawn up and soon became clearly polarised. There were powerful figures on both sides but, messages actually meant, except vague assurances by its proponents that it would be quick and straightforward, and liberating and empowering for the country. This lack of clarity would haunt the incumbent government, P

out a sample of typical front-page headlines, usually printed in huge, thick capital letters, which are typical of hundreds of such titles issued in the months preceding the referendum.

Table 1 Typical headlines demonisinms issue

British
more, to UKIP) and lack of trust towards politicians.[4]

Hence, what the Brexit vote revealed was a sharply divided population, the poorest, oldest and least-edu

It would be an over-simplification to interpret the referendum as a duel between the - - Following Bailey (2019), the Brexit-supporting camp consisted of four main political groupings.

- The majority nationalist position within the Eurosceptic wing of the Conservative Party, ed a major constraint on national policies, especially those on trade and immigration, and that only by leaving the EU could Britain reclaim national sovereignty, control its borders, and reassert voice and in advancing a global trade agenda.

- A more ultra nationalist position was taken by UKIP, whose sole purpose was to leave the EU. UKIP also vehemently opposed high levels of immigration, especially that from within Europe. After the referendum, and in reaction to the stalled progress towards departing the EU, UKIP leader Farage broke away to found the Brexit Party, which became a strategic player in the December 2019 election which returned a reinvigorated Johnson-led Conservative ara

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responsible for the complex wranglings which delayed the formal departure for another three and a half years. The most obviously oppositional clash of worldviews is that between Europhiles and Europhobes, a more or less unbreachable set of values
in the world. For the Europhiles, the UK is an integral part of Europe and is stronger, and better positioned globally, by this alliance with the EU. Europhobes are innately suspicious of the European project, which they see as to . They see the UK in terms of a broader, more global positionality; whilst envision a return to some kind of post-imperial identity harking back to a mythical past (and an even more mythical future) when Britain was a dominant geopolitical force in the world.

Underlying these conflictual and polarised political interpretations were more complex class dynamics. In the conventional class-based view, Brexit was caused by the class conflict exacerbated by the neoliberal restructuring of the British labour market, a process traceable to the 1970s and 1980s and then reinforced by the post-2008 politics of austerity (McKenzie 2017). But, in reality, Brexit cut across class divisions, or was made to by the machinations and persuasiveness of populist political rhetoric and media bombardment (Vey 2019). Those , aristocratic
toffs with landed property, huge business wealth and family-lineage privilege (perhaps best embodied in the louche figure of Jacob Rees Mogg, Chair of the European Research Group and Leader of the House of Commons in the current Conservative government); on the other, the disaffected working classes, battered by austerity and hampered by minimal educational qualifications, low incomes and high unemployment. Brexit tendencies were also high amongst sections of the middle classes, particularly older suburban office-workers who held a nostalgic

and amongst the more
de facto coalition of strange
political and social-class bedfellows!

majority of Labour Party voters (except those who had defected to UKIP and the Brexit Party),

and Ken Clarke, both passionate Europeans, as well as other business-oriented Conservative MPs and voters who saw the economic advantages of remaining in the EU. The point to be emphasised here is that, not only did the Brexiteers and Remainers have obviously radically different worldviews, ideological frames and personal motivations for their anti- or pro-EU stance, but also each of the two main camps was itself made up of stakeholders with different and often incompatible backgrounds and worldviews. This internal fractioning of the Leave ity, at least until the general election of

stakeholder positionalities also made it difficult to agree on a common solution on each side: a hard vs a soft Brexit or a second referendum vs revoking Article 50.

The third proposition is that *every wicked problem can be considered a symptom of another problem or problems*. This is one of two propositions that are more complex to analyse, so it will be treated in more detail. The statement is patently true, although there are different interpretations regarding the relative importance of each underlying problem and the extent to which they are connected to or layered within each other, especially if one takes a causal

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nearly £40bn, a fall in the value of the GB pound against the euro (and the US dollar), and a forecast that the average UK household would be worse off to the tune of £900 per year. The City of London would be weakened as a global financial powerhouse, and anti-immigration measures would produce a shortage of vital labour for agriculture, tourism, the catering industry, the health and care sectors and certain branches of manufacturing. In addition, the three-plus years of dithering following the referendum had the effect of paralysing the development of the economy since entrepreneurs and investors, including foreign investors, could not plan ahead in a climate of uncertainty over the future direction of the economy.

And then, all of these dire predictions of the economic costs of Brexit were thrown in the air when it became clear, in March 2020, that a new, much more dramatic, economic reality had dawned with the arrival in Britain of the coronar nBT/F3e92ce 4<615.9e22 615.94 Tmona

part of the discursive frame and policy environment leading up to the referendum and has migration

number of British citizens, who had arrived as children from the Caribbean in the early postwar decades, had been unlawfully repatriated, or imprisoned, or denied their rights to remain, work and access healthcare in the UK.[13]

Source: Socialist.net (2019).

Fast-forward to February 2020: after three and a half years of limbo for the EU migrants already in the UK, during which their future status and rights to stay were yet to be concretely

the right to stay in the UK. In the future, newly arriving EU citizens will be treated the same as other foreign nationalities and their immigration will be subject to a points system. According

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Successful applicants for a work v

Sixthly, *solutions to wicked problems are not órightô or ówrongô, nor are they órueô or ófalseô* for different groups of people) This certainly applies to Brexit, for the majority of people, happy, except those who gain political power through its implementation (the Brexiteers currently at the helm of the Conservative government) and a small number of influential (but largely hidden) financiers and business owners who will try to make a killing. Hence the wicked problem of Brexit demonstrates the challenge, indeed the near-impossibility, of arriving at a sense of the happy with the outcome.

This last statement links to the penultimate of my wicked-problem propositions: *those seeking to resolve the problem are those who caused it*. This, too, rings true for Brexit. It was the Conservative government (of Cameron) which created the problem, and it is the current Johnson-led government which is charged with implementing the result a process which is e in landing Johnson his victory in the December 2019 general election was a kind of false promise; misleading to the extent that all the detailed arrangements still have to be made, and have subsequently been derailed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The other way of interpreting this proposition about cause -aligned voters by holding a second referendum which, arguably, would have reversed the result. However, then the country would have to confront the political and social implications of this stage- potential civil unrest.

The eighth and final condition is that *solutions to wicked problems need a great number of people to change their mindset and behaviour* a way, a very real sense of not going back. This is not just because of its practical and political irreversibility but also because, even if Article 50 had been revoked or if a second referendum had been held and had swung the other way, there would not be a return to the *status quo ante* but to a new reality possibly more sharply riven than before, as noted above. In fact, only a relatively small number of people would have needed to change their minds to tip a second-

Conclusion: Brexit and the coronavirus a wicked synergy

potential of this brilliant country to make better the lives of everyone in every corner of our was confirmed in the country. Whether the pandemic will evolve to fulfill the range of criteria for being categorised

of intensive care, quarantine, tracking and testing, two-metre social distancing and an eventual vaccine, then the problem will have been solved until the next global pandemic. However, if the vaccine proves elusive and the virus becomes established longer-term, then it becomes more like a super-wicked problem. For the UK, in the shorter term, it is evident that there are -problems, including contradictions and ironies. I round off this paper by identifying a few of these.

One of the most current issues at the time of writing (May 2020) is the shortage of seasonal agricultural labour, as the main summer picking season in the UK approaches. Here, Brexit and Covid-19 have delivered a double whammy. Brexit and its crude narrative on the need to control immigration had already discouraged new arrivals, especially those from the EU8 and EU2 countries, which were the main suppliers of seasonal agricultural workers in recent years. Now,

late April, 34.5% were BAME, two and a half times their ratio in the overall UK population 14% (Iqbal 2020). There was a touching but ironic acknowledgment of the reliance on immigrant staff by Boris Johnson, who himself was stricken by the virus and became

facto coalition of Europhobic and xenophobic Tories, UKIP and the Brexit Party, who surely represent a minority of the British population, most of whom did not vote in the referendum for

I want to return, finally, to the question posed at the outset: What was Brexit really

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