

International and pluri-disciplinary symposium

Constitutions under pressure: France and the United Kingdom in an age of populism and Brexit

Hosted by:

Panthéon-Assas University (Paris – France)

on 28 May 2020

&

Centre for British Politics and Government, King's College (London – UK)

on 4 June 2020

Co-organised by Aurélien Antoine (Saint Etienne University), Andrew Blick (King's College London), Geraldine Gadbin-George (Panthéon-Assas University) & Elizabeth Gibson-Morgan (Tours University)

The 'Brexit' referendum of 23 June 2016 marked a social and political turning point for the European Union. After 43 years of membership, in a referendum, UK voters supported leaving by a majority of 51.9 per cent. Leading UK politicians, most of whom disliked the outcome, nonetheless accepted that they were bound by it. There has followed a period of political upheaval unsurpassed in UK history. The result has also caused turmoil in neighbouring member states such as France for a range of historical, economic, social and political reasons.

On both sides of the Channel, the results of the Brexit referendum acted as a catalyst for political and constitutional change. Its effects were felt not only by those in government but also by all traditional political parties and, at the base, by the people themselves. Voting patterns in the referendum revealed sharp social and attitudinal divisions within the UK that cut across normal party-political divisions. It has become clear that things which seemed established could be dis-established. New or dormant political parties have emerged or re-awoken, dislocating the established party-political system, leading to further political fragmentation and divisions. The word "populism" has gained in public currency.

Pressure is being put upon the existing constitutional arrangements. Within the United Kingdom, devolution has become an increasingly contested concept. Devolved executives and legislatures have pressed for their interests in the Brexit process. The future presence of Scotland and Northern Ireland within the UK has come increasingly into doubt. In France, after an autumn and winter of discontent, a proposed reform of the constitution – concerning Parliament, the *Conseil constitutionnel* and the judiciary – should be presented to the Council of ministers before July 2019.

This symposium will look at the constitutional situation in the United Kingdom and in France. In the light of their respective histories and current social and political developments, the organisers would welcome proposals from academics, policy-makers and opinion formers on the following subjects:

1) The meaning of “populism” and its relationship with the constitutional arrangements of both countries.

This may include, for example, a consideration of direct and representative democracy, including the role of referendums; the value of public engagement exercises such as the possibility of a Citizens' Convention in the United Kingdom or the part played by the January-April 2019 Grand Debate in France.

2) Constitutional enforcement mechanisms, how they work and/or interact.

Beyond the traditional debate between the French written/codified and the British unwritten/uncodified constitutions, questions to be examined could include the role given to committees in both countries (like the House of Lords Select Committee on the constitution in the UK, other parliamentary committees in both countries); the use of conventions (including those between the two houses of parliament) in both countries; the modern uses of the *Conseil constitutionnel* in France and its adaptability to the UK system; the means of circumventing the constitution. Another interesting issue would be to examine whether there is an implicit “European constitution”.

3) The actual and/or relative powers of the executive, legislature and judiciary and their possible intertwining.

This could include questions about national governance (such as comparing prerogatives at top level or delegated powers) or territorial governance (including devolution).

Proposals focusing on the constitutional differences and similarities between the two countries and the respective lessons to be learnt from them are strongly encouraged.

The language of the conference will be English. The symposium will be followed by a publication in English and/or French.

Communications will last 20mn each and will be followed by a discussion.

Please send your proposals of 400 words and a short biography (in English) by 1 September 2019 to the four organisers:

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