

# How foreigners became the convenient scapegoat of the referendum campaign

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*The Brexit campaign was never really about the EU or even immigration. It was about foreigners. Foreigners became a scapegoat for all the things that are not working properly – including in the NHS and in schools. But the government could not have confronted this use of xenophobia, writes [Rodney Barker](#). Doing so would be to admit that these failures were not because of immigration but because of its own policies.*



England, though not Scotland or Northern Ireland, has voted to leave the European Union. What the Remain campaign never quite realised was that Brexit, the campaign to leave, was never about the EU; it wasn't even really about immigration; it was about foreigners. But the government's own position was fatally compromised because it was unable to confront the use of xenophobia.

The campaigning use of immigration was to identify an enemy, exaggerated and partly imagined as enemies always are in this familiar political tactic, who could be blamed for longer waiting lists in the NHS, overcrowded class rooms in schools, reduction in public services. The government could never say these worsening of the conditions of the people were not because of immigration but because of its own old-fashioned economic liberal policy of austerity.



So two completely different debates were being carried on, a fairly abstract debate about the economic benefits of the EU by the Remain campaign, and a scapegoating campaign against immigrants and the European Union.

What the government is now faced with is not only the economic consequences of a break with the EU, but a fracturing of the United Kingdom, with England and Wales voting one way, and Scotland and Northern Ireland voting in a completely different direction. The government has avoided, once again, taking the blame for the erosion of public services, but at the cost of the unity of its party and its country.

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