



BREXIT BRITS ABROAD

Brexit Brits Abroad Podcast Episode 19: Who cares about UK citizens living in the EU27?

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About the episode

Chantelle Lewis joins Michaela in the studio to discuss who cares about UK citizens living in the EU27? They focus on when and how UK citizens living in the EU27 are represented in UK parliamentary debates and proceedings. They reveal the limited representation of these populations and highlight how, through the focus on issues that lie within the UK government's responsibility—franchise, pensions, healthcare and exportable benefits—produces a particular figure of UK citizens living abroad emerges: a vulnerable, OAP living in the sunshine.

You can download this episode of the podcast at <http://brexitbritsabroad.libsyn.com/ep019-who-cares-about-uk-citizens-living-in-the-eu27>

Transcript

MB Welcome back to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. I'm Dr Michaela Benson. In today's episode Chantelle and I discuss who represents the British who live in the EU27. What we're trying to communicate here is the complexity around the ways that UK citizens living in the EU27 are understood and represented in UK Parliament. For this work, Chantelle's been looking back over Parliamentary proceedings through the Hansard reports, going back a few years to look at what particular issues have been brought to Parliament that are of specific interest, that specifically relate to UK citizens abroad, and I think it's fair to say as a starting point that there are very limited issues that get brought to UK Parliament pre-Brexit relating to the rights of these UK citizens. Would you agree with that Chantelle?

CL Yeah I would agree with that. There seems to be a collection of Members of Parliament and Lords who care about the representation of British people living within the EU, but there is a select few, there isn't a universal consensus on their, on how they should be treated and how they should be represented, there is a select few people who care basically.

MB Yes, we have rather evocatively titled this episode who cares about the British in the EU 27, but really our focus today is specifically going

to be on UK Parliament because I do think that there is a broader sentiment circulating at the moment, particularly around the people that we've been speaking to, and certainly as illustrated by the campaigning of particular groups supporting the rights of British populations living abroad, that the British government has somehow neglected them and certainly looking back through that record it does look like there's very limited concern for their interests, although as you said yourself there are some people who have historically cared more than others. What would you say are the main kind of flash points where UK citizens who live overseas are referred to in Parliament?

CL So I would say prior to Brexit the, a key theme that appears to come up in the Hansard reports is the voting rights of British citizens living overseas, so not just within the EU, and how they should have a vote to, vote for life.

MB Yes, in the previous episodes we did talk a little bit about that extension of the vote for life and just a little reminder at the moment British citizens who live overseas are only eligible to vote in UK parliamentary elections for 15 years after they leave the UK, so once that time is up they are disenfranchised, politically disenfranchised from the UK parliamentary politics.

CL Yes, and for the collection of MPs and Lords that care about the voting rights of the British living overseas, they describe the fact that this 15 year rule is in place as a democracy deficit, or a deficit to our democracy.

MB When did we get to the stage where this 15 year rule came into play, what came before it?

CL So prior to this it was actually 20 years that you could live abroad for whilst keeping your right to vote in UK parliamentary elections. The Labour party changed this in 2000 and their thoughts were that you can't vote in local, on local issues if you have not lived in that area or lived in Britain for that long.

MB So when the Labour party were in government they made a change through the Political Parties Elections and Referendum Act Of 2000, which reduced the time length on the right to vote once people had moved outside the UK. Now this has been interpreted as a ploy to kind of made on the grounds that UK citizens who lived abroad were more likely to be Conservative supporters and Conservative donors and so this was seen as a way of closing that down a little bit, and I think that's quite a widespread belief, but from what you're saying, the way that you framed it, it sounds a little more like their concern was to do with the shape of electoral politics in the UK and how that's organised and it is organised around local areas, there is no overseas representation, there's no dedicated representation of British citizens who live overseas. D'you want to talk us through a little bit more that, that opposition?

CL Yes so I mean one of their key notions about changing the vote from 20 years to 15 years was around this word excessive, they saw the fact that you could remain part of our parliamentary system without living here for such a long time as excessive. They also describe the fact that we haven't got enough representation, voting representation in Britain so why should we focus on those that have left Britain, we need to have more voter turnout in the UK as a whole so resources should go into the UK. The opposition also says that we, if we're going to be looking at the right to vote for British people that have not lived in the country for such a long time, we should also be looking at the right to vote for non EU migrants that have lived in Britain for a very long time that haven't got the right to vote, that pay their taxes.

MB I think this is a really interesting way of relocating the discussion about the rights of UK citizens who've made their homes and lives outside of the UK to continue to vote, within those broader questions about who the UK democratic system actually represents and who it should represent. So these are questions about suffrage and enfranchisement that have been raised in opposition to the extension of the vote to the vote for life, and you know questions about resources, how are these things going to be paid for and where is the money best spent, if we really want a truly democratic system.

CL Definitely, and it's almost like the opposition uses reasons like practicalities whereas the collection of people that are for British people having a vote for life regardless of whether they live in Britain or not, they're more interested in the symbolic and everlasting position of being British and the voting rights for British people, so lots of conversations about how being a taxpayer, having served in the armed forces, having been a proponent of Britishness for such a long time should automatically guarantee you a vote for life regardless of whether you live in the country or not, so the opposition is more focused on the practicalities I would say whereas the people that are dedicated to giving British people a vote for life, there is a lot of symbolism there about what it means to be British.

MB Certainly goes back to some of those themes that we've been talking through in the podcasts recently about who is considered as British and it is interesting within that context that UK citizens who live overseas seem to be being argued for on the grounds that they are British, that that is without question by the people who are in favour of this vote for life. The way that we set up this discussion might incline some of you to think that we're talking about party politics. But it is a little bit more complex than that, as we've outlined in our blogpost as well on this issue. It really does seem to go to the heart of those questions precisely about who UK politicians should be representing at this point in time and why, and certainly some of the opposition is framed as well in relation to other suggestions about who might be disenfranchised by precisely the same people who are supporting a vote for life of these UK citizens overseas, so it's really really complex, it really isn't about petty party politics.

MB Another stand-out theme I'd say post-Brexit is the implications of health care for British people living within the EU after Brexit. Overwhelmingly these representations have been focused on the older generation or pensioners, people that have retired. What we've shown in this research is that the populations of Britons living in the EU is diverse but when we look at the representations in Parliament of British populations and with a particular focus on health care, it would seem that they represent the populations mainly of the elderly. Now we discuss that perhaps this is rightly so, like the health care is possibly going to impact the older generation the most after Brexit, if there is a no deal they are perhaps going to be the people that are most reliant on government intervention.

CL Just to be clear, what we intend when we say that health care is going to be the issue that impacts on those elderly populations living abroad the most, isn't actually just a reflection on their use of the health care system but how they access health care living abroad through their S1 entitlement so simply, and it's a little bit more complex than this, if you have retired abroad, so if you've reached retirement age in the UK and then chosen to live elsewhere in the EU 27, at the moment what happens is that your health care is, you are entitled to use health care in the state that you live on the same terms as people who've been nationals there, and in theory what then happens is that that is reimbursed, or at least the part that is a state contribution is reimbursed by the British government. Now in the case of British populations who work in the EU 27 who are paying into social security systems in those countries, they are eligible to those health care services on the grounds they pay into social security so the contribution of the UK government is insignificant there, it's not, it isn't the same terms essentially. So that's why we say that these older populations are rightly the focus of those discussions about what happens to health care after Brexit. And just a little reminder, as we said in one of our myth-busting podcasts between Christmas and new year, only 21% of the UK citizen population currently living in the EU 27 are actually of pensionable age and above. So I think what is interesting though is disregarding that discussion that we've just had about the focus on those elderly populations in relation to health care, what's fascinating is that when you look across those transcripts from Parliament, through those Hansard reports, you do see this curious slippage, this evoking of the idea of this kind of vulnerable elderly person who has chosen to live elsewhere in the EU, so really the mobilisation of the stereotype, in a way that's quite surprising in some respects, because it isn't just along the grounds of those issues around health care that this comes to mind. It's almost like, in the discussions about citizens' rights, there is this figure of the British pensioner living abroad that kind of haunts all of those discussions.

CL Definitely, and I think what it also brings into play is this idea that who is, who should be protected, and just looking at how, particularly in the sub-committees and the reciprocal health care sub-committee, looking at how the Members of Parliament act and how they are surprised at the uncertainty that might be faced by these elderly populations after Brexit, should there be for example a no deal, so it's almost like they are positioned obviously as vulnerable but as someone that we should be looking after.

MB It's interesting to see how that particular stereotype of British populations living abroad has travelled and found its way into those discussions. It might be a little intangible to you listening in today to really understand the extent to which that's happening. It's much more subtle than an explicit acknowledgement that they're talking about UK pensioners, it's in the way that they describe the particular issues. And I think in the prominence of those issues around health care, around pensions, around exportable benefits particularly things like the winter fuel allowance, that we start to see the extent to which this vulnerable UK population abroad is represented in Parliament.

CL There's one instance however where they perhaps aren't viewed as vulnerable and aren't as protected and that's when they look at, or when there's discussions in the sub-committees, House of Lords and House of Commons, on the possible impact of the NHS if these people were to return to Britain. So it's almost like the tone changes, like oh well would the NHS cope with that? Would we be able to handle that? I don't think these people, these people can't really come back can they? It's almost those sort of conversations or those sort of themes which emerge, so when it looks like there might be a, and this is a direct quote, a strain on the NHS if there was not to be a health care arrangement after Brexit that would benefit the elderly, how would they cope, how would the NHS cope with that.

MB Certainly this image of 1.2 million British people returning to the UK and needing to access the NHS is one that has come back time and time again through media reporting and through those parliamentary records as well. What that really points to is the way in which the tone shifts when suddenly it looks as though the British government would have to take full responsibility for those populations who they can currently, who they currently have very limited responsibility for. I think that's really significant within the context of those discussions about citizens' rights and Brexit. And it really does, on the project it's really caused us to question who really has responsibility for these populations. And that is a question not about ethics and morals, it really is a question about, on which level British people feel they're being represented and on which level people are supposed to be responsible for these populations. I think that's coming up time and time again.

CL Yes, and I think in addition to that, what is also coming up in these parliamentary proceedings is how little even politicians know about the detail of what it would mean for British people living within the EU if there wasn't to be a deal on Brexit or if Brexit wasn't to go in a way that maintains the status quo. So this is particularly evident in the different population sizes that they refer to, so there's a real, there's real differences in how many British people different MPs think are living within the EU 27. There's also, as you mentioned before, this representation of the EHIC cards when they use it in a way which isn't actually correct, and it's just quite fascinating how these people are representatives in government and they don't actually know that much, these are our government representatives and it's interesting what they do know and how reliant they possibly are on the stereotypical depictions of the British living within the EU.

MB Yes, so we find people referring to the EHIC cards and the agreements that have been made about the EHIC card which is the European Health Insurance card, which allows emergency treatment of EU nationals travelling within the EU should they need it. This is actually of very limited significance to British populations who live abroad, who have to have alternative arrangements for their health care, because the EHIC is only a temporary measure, it's really designed for people travelling within the EU rather than people who've decided to make their homes and lives in those places. I also think that this discussion of representation of these British populations comes to light at a time when, for whatever reason, the Brexit negotiations have been organised along this idea of a bilateral agreement, and so to a certain degree the British government has said OK well we're going to talk about the case of EU nationals living in the UK and we expect the European Union to reciprocate in respect to how they treat UK nationals living within their borders. So actually the discussion about citizens' rights, that's been brought to the UK Parliament, represents a little bit of a flash point for talking about UK citizens living in the EU 27. And it is quite concerning that there seems to be very limited understanding of this population, it's perhaps not surprising given some of the issues that we raised before when we were talking about overseas voting and the fact that there is no dedicated Member of Parliament responsible for the case of UK citizens who live overseas, that is something that some of the UK citizens living abroad would like to see some active campaigning for a little along the lines of the French electoral system, whether that will ever see the light of day is questionable I think, for various reasons. But I think that what it shows is that this question about citizens' rights in respect to Brexit really has brought some attention to the case of these UK citizens who live abroad, even if the way that that is framed is quite limited.

CL Definitely, and it's really interesting how surprised and shocked and almost interested at times some Members of Parliament are when they're either

hearing evidence or debating these issues within the Houses of Lords and House of Commons, like even that response of oh really, so that's how that works, understanding the detail that's involved in this, is, it's interesting but it's slightly disconcerting because these are our elected representatives, I mean for the British people not living in Britain, what must that feel like, that actually oh you don't understand how my health care works, or you don't understand how important insurance is to me.

MB Disconcerting is a really really good word for that Chantelle. I think it shows more broadly a kind of lack of understanding about how freedom of movement functions within the European Union which is central of course to those discussions about Brexit. And it's only in light of the UK's decision to leave the European Union that politicians, as much as the general public are actually finding out how those things worked. I think that's quite a sad indictment really in lots of ways. But I do think, and going back to what we opened the podcast with, that really this question about the representation of UK citizens living in the EU 27, could also be a question about other populations and other, and how they're understood by UK parliamentary officials and by people who may be responsible for their lives even if that is in a limited capacity. And how that knowledge is better communicated and better understood I think is central to that, as much as the question of who UK democracy really represents. So thank you very much Chantelle.

CL Thank you Michaela.

MB Thank you for listening to the Brexit Brits Abroad podcast. If you've enjoyed what we've been talking about today and want to find out more, check out our website www.brexitbritsabroad.com, or you can follow us on social media via Twitter @brexpatseu and on Facebook. And don't forget to subscribe to our podcasts on iTunes.