

Vote that reverberates around world: Britain wants to leave European Union

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Demonstrators opposing Britain's exit from the European Union hold a protest in Parliament Square in London, England, on Saturday, June 25, 2016, following Friday's EU referendum result. AP Photo/Tim Ireland

LONDON, England — Britain voted to leave the European Union (EU) after a bitterly divisive referendum campaign Friday. The outcome toppled the prime minister and sent stock markets around the world plunging. The vote also shattered the stability of the EU, which was designed half a century ago to prevent World War III.

The decision launches a years-long process to renegotiate trade, business and political links between the United Kingdom and what would become a 27-nation bloc of countries. No major country has ever left the EU before, and the divorce could take decades to complete.

"The dawn is breaking on an independent United Kingdom," said Nigel Farage, leader of the UK Independence Party, which wanted to break away from the EU. "Let June 23 go down in our history as our independence day!"

Prime Minister Plans To Resign

Prime Minister David Cameron, who had led the campaign to keep Britain in the EU, said he would resign by October. He left it to his successor to decide when to leave the European Union.

Polls ahead of the vote had shown a close race, and the momentum had increasingly appeared to be on the "remain" side over the last week. But in an election Thursday marked by notably high turnout, "leave" won with 52 percent of the votes. Of the 46 million registered voters, 72 percent cast ballots.

The result shocked investors, and stock markets fell around the world. Key stock markets dropped 10 percent in Germany and about 8 percent in Japan and Britain, and the euro and British pound also lost value.

"Leave" Leader Tones It Down

Seeking to calm frayed nerves was the most prominent "leave" campaigner, Boris Johnson. Taking a somber tone unusual for the flamboyant former London mayor, he described the EU as a noble idea that was no longer right for Britain. He said the result in no way means the United Kingdom will be "less united" or "less European."

Even as he spoke, however, Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said a second Scottish vote on independence from the United Kingdom is now "highly likely." Scotland voted in 2014 to remain a part of the UK, but that decision was seen by many as depending on the UK remaining in the EU.

Britain would be the first major country to leave the EU, which was born from the ashes of World War II. By creating the bloc of nations, European leaders sought to build links and avert future hostility.

Leaders from across the EU voiced regret at the British decision.

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," said Donald Tusk, the president of the European Council, who vowed not to let the vote derail the EU.

Could France And Netherlands Be Next?

But already, far-right leaders in France and the Netherlands were calling for a similar anti-EU vote in their countries.

The referendum showed Britain to be a sharply divided nation: Strong pro-EU votes in the economic and cultural powerhouse of London and Scotland were countered by strong feelings for an exit across the rest of England.

"It's a vindication of 1,000 years of British democracy," Jonathan Campbell James declared at the train station in Richmond, southwest London. "From Magna Carta all the way through to now, we've had a slow evolution of democracy, and this vote has vindicated the maturity and depth of the democracy in our country."

Others expressed anger and frustration. Olivia Sangster-Bullers, 24, called the result "absolutely disgusting."

"Good luck to all of us, I say, especially those trying to build a future with our children," she said.

Labour Party Had Opposed The Referendum

Cameron called the referendum largely to silence voices to his right. Johnson, who like Cameron is from the Conservative Party, now becomes a leading contender to replace Cameron as prime minister. The vote also dealt a blow to the main opposition Labour Party, which threw its weight behind the "remain" campaign.

The vote became a rebellion against political, economic and social leaders, while many groups — company presidents, scientists, soldiers — had written open letters warning of the consequences of an exit. Farage called the result "a victory for ordinary people against the big banks, big business and big politics."

American presidential candidate Donald Trump praised the decision, saying Britons "took back their country. It's a great thing." He said people in the United States and the United Kingdom are angry about similar things.

The "leave" campaign accused the immigrants of putting stress on Britain's housing market, public services and jobs.

Those concerns were magnified by the refugee crisis of the past year that saw more than 1 million people from the Middle East and Africa flood into the EU.

The slaying of pro-Europe lawmaker Jo Cox a week before the vote brought a shocked pause to both campaigns. While it isn't clear whether her killer was influenced by the EU debate, her death aroused fears that the referendum had stirred demons it would be difficult to subdue.

Long Divorce Proceedings

The result triggers a new series of negotiations that is expected to last two years or more as Britain and the EU search for a way to separate economies that have become intertwined since the UK joined on January 1, 1973. Until those talks are completed, Britain will remain a member of the EU.

In addition, the complex nature of Britain's integration with the EU means that breaking up will be hard to do. The negotiations will include cross-border security, foreign policy cooperation and a common fishing policy.

It will also threaten London's position as one of the world's most important financial centers. The UK hosts more headquarters of non-EU companies than Germany, France, Switzerland and the Netherlands put together.