

Abstract

Brexit represents arguably the most dramatic development in the history of the European Union (EU). For a third country such as Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) with whom it shares a Commonwealth connection, has generally been perceived as serving as a bridge between Australia and the EU. Thus, Brexit represents a conundrum for Australia in its grappling of how to approach its relations with the EU into the future. Perceptions of the EU from the Asia-Pacific region have been regularly studied since the early 2000s. However, there has been a shortcoming in specific focus of Australian perceptions of the EU since 2008, and specifically Australian elite perceptions. Brexit presents an opportunity to update the existing body of literature, thus this research analyses how the Australian elite perceive the EU following the UK's departure. This research utilises a two-tiered methodological approach in order to ascertain what the Australian elite perception of the EU is since the Brexit referendum in June 2016. The methods include a critical content analysis of Australian think tank outputs, and semi-structured interviews with Australian elite figures identified as having extensive knowledge of the EU. The research tests the notion of the UK's centrality to Australia-EU relations and finds that there are mixed perceptions on this, with some believing the claim to be true while others perceive that Australia has in fact dealt more directly with the EU. The research also finds that there are substantial shifts in perceptions of the EU's strategic power, internal condition and negotiating power following Brexit. However, perceptions of the EU's economic prowess and normative power remain largely unchanged. The research also indicates that Australia should improve its understanding of the EU and establish more dynamic relations with Brussels and powerful member states.