

The EU was always going to punish us for Brexit

Attacking Brussels for 'intransigence' shows how deluded Leavers are about their ability to strike a favourable deal.



On Easter Island in the South Pacific, hundreds of vast stone heads each weighing around 12 tonnes gaze into the distance, keeping their secrets about how they got there. One theory goes that the Rapa Nui people cut down all their trees in order to move the monuments into place, thus destroying their fertile land and the wood to build fishing canoes, leading to food shortages, internecine warfare, cannibalism and the destruction of their own civilisation. If true, the felling of Easter Island's trees is perhaps the only act of self-sabotage in history that rivals Brexit.

In two short years we have gone from one of the fastest growing nations in the G7 to one of the slowest; from respected global player to source of international bemusement. Still, the government continues to assert, rather valiantly, that the UK can call the shots. Last week the prime minister, foreign secretary, Brexit secretary and business secretary rode into France like the four horsemen of the Brexipocalypse, with dire warnings of "no deal" if the EU rejects the Chequers proposal. Trade secretary Liam Fox followed this up at the weekend by taking a pop at the "intransigence" of the European Commission, suggesting that "if they don't like the one [deal] we have put on the table then it's down to them to show us one that they can suggest that would be acceptable to us".

An air of futility hangs over it all. Whatever threats Britain makes, whatever warnings we issue, whether we wheedle or plead or bash our fists against the European behemoth, the EU was always going to have the whip hand. They were always going to come out on top, to the detriment of the UK. Why? Because for

the EU there is a major upside to each outcome, deal or no deal. Either the bloc wins economically with a deal that is more beneficial to them than to us, or it wins politically with Britain crashing out, suffering shock and disruption and serving as a warning to other nations flirting with leaving. It's a win-win situation for them, and therefore lose-lose for us. This fact has damned the UK from the start.

For the past two years some have pushed the deluded idea that "no deal" is as risky for the EU as it is for Britain. Last year David Davis even suggested that for the Netherlands, Belgium, France and Denmark "the impact of no deal would be ... more dramatic than for us". Of course crashing out would hurt Europe's economies; the IMF reckons that growth across the 27 remaining EU states would fall by as much as 1.5 per cent by 2030 (compared with almost 4 per cent for the UK). But Brexiteers who think this danger gives us more leverage with Barnier and Co are wrong, because while a hard Brexit will harm Europe's prospects, it will also help the European project. What more powerful deterrent to Frexit, Nexit or Czexit than a Brexit that is chaotic, even catastrophic?

Those optimistic blue-sky Brexiteers who claimed this would be "the easiest deal in history" overlooked two crucial things. First, how intensely Europhiles fear further referendums and the unravelling of the EU — and with good reason. The Netherlands' new far-right party, Forum for Democracy, wants a referendum on EU membership and is riding high in the polls. France's National Front may be weak now, but it won a third of the votes in last year's election and has a habit of flaring up like a virus the body can't reject. The Czech anti-EU party Freedom and Direct Democracy surged in elections last year. Matteo Salvini, Italy's deputy prime minister, loves to attack "the Europe of the elites, of banks, of finance, of immigration" and has said that next year's European elections are a chance to create "an international alliance of populists". In this ambition he is being ably assisted by Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's former chief strategist, who hopes to send the same shock waves through Europe that went through America in 2016.

The other critical point that bullish Brexiteers fail to appreciate is that Europhiles see this organisation through an emotional lens. For the UK, the EU has always been the means to a practical end; for some of our neighbours it is a passion project. As Lord Hill of Oareford, Britain's former European commissioner, has said: "People here forget that for the Europeans their project is an emotional project ... If we think in the UK that ultimately economic rationalism will win out in terms of the negotiation, that is to misread how the Europeans will approach

this negotiation.” This was echoed by Sir Peter Torry, former ambassador to Berlin, who explained: “Europe was a salvation for Germany after the horrors of World War Two ... If push comes to shove and it’s EU integrity or selling more cars ... Germany will plump for the EU.”

These two currents of feeling — fear of Euroscepticism and love for the EU — are why those on the Continent were always destined to ignore the UK’s pleading for a mutually beneficial deal, whatever the rational economic arguments for trade that is as open and frictionless as possible. A good deal for the UK would risk emboldening Eurosceptics elsewhere and undermining the European project, so it was never going to happen. As the former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis (who bears the scars from his own run-ins with Brussels) has said, the EU’s “greatest nightmare is a mutually advantageous agreement between Britain and the European Union. They are only concerned with one thing: how to signal to the rest of Europe that anyone who votes ... in a manner which challenges the authority of the deep establishment in Europe will get crushed.”

The EU intransigence Liam Fox rages about was destined from the start. So let no Brexiteers claim, when the current shambles deepens to a crisis, that it would all have been different if we’d been more bold, if we’d had more hope or optimism, or if the government had prepared more thoroughly for a no-deal outcome. Let no one hang this all on the hapless Theresa May, the greatest fall-guy in political history who (though not good at her job) could have as easily changed the mind of the EU establishment as changed the tides of the sea.

The Europeans were always going to put first the integrity of the single market, the four freedoms, the project they believe in so passionately. Britain was always going to scrape a deal that would leave us worse off than before, or no deal that will take us God knows where. The writing was always on the wall. That’s why Brexit was always a terrible idea.

Source: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/eu-was-always-going-to-punish-us-for-b-rexit-mqdb3890m>

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