

Brexit: Views from Brussels and London

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Like in a game of broken telephone, the lines seem to have been cut off between Westminster and the Berlaymont. In Brussels, EU officials go by the mantra “no negotiation without notification”. In London, Theresa May’s cabinet seems to be a government in search of a plan. I suspect that is why Whitehall does not give “running commentary” on Brexit.

Britain and the EU have long been estranged partners who needed to keep sharing a bed for the sake of the children. They had stopped talking months ago, much before the UK asked for divorce. Indeed, this absence of communication helped Brexiters a lot: under Conservative leader David Cameron, Britain slowly retreated from the EU (from the European Parliament to the diplomatic service). London stopped calling. And Brussels was never too good at picking up the phone in the first place. So began a series of misunderstandings, uncontested claims and outright lies which ended up with Britain’s decision to withdraw completely from the European Union.

The EU is not guilt-free: in the run-up to the referendum, the Brussels bubble lived in denial (as it often does), stubbornly insisting on “business as usual”, oblivious to what was going on just a two-hour train ride away. Nobody I knew thought Brexit could happen. I have been laughed at in dinner parties. More than one official called me a “pessimistic”. My favourite moment was when a friend working at the European Commission told me to chill out. After all, have we not got out of much worse crisis before, like the “empty chair” incident? Did I not remember the British rebate? I was stunned. Yes, these episodes were serious. But very few people know about them. They belong to history books and compilations of case-law which us, EU lawyers, are so fond of. They were basically diplomatic incidents which required a considerable amount of *savoir-faire*. But I doubt they would be decided on a referendum. None of them ended up with a country leaving the European Union. The Brexit referendum (and everything that happened before it) did. It is fine to be a bit far away from what your average Joe may be thinking. That is the point of elites, and Brussels, like any other capital in the world, is run by them. But

there is a point of non-return: when your average Joe is a strange to you. When you laugh at your average Joe. When you think that, because you know better, things will work out. Well, they do not. That we know now.

But, as arrogant and unprepared Brussels may have been, London was worse. David Cameron had no plan B. Actually, he did not have a plan A either. Brexiters had no idea what to do next if they actually did win. As Ian Bond, CER's Foreign Policy Director says "Our job was to persuade you to jump off the cliff. Someone else should have given you wings". And that is fine, too. Brexiters were just gambling. But the government should have not. Cameron's cabinet toyed with dangerous ideas about restricting migration (caps, quotas and so on) almost from day one. They rode the wave of Brexit populism until they realised it was too late. They committed to a referendum which timing was poor, for purely domestic reasons. And they failed to engage constructively with the EU at a time where, frankly, the continent had better things to worry about than Britain's tantrums. The February deal could have been an opportunity for the UK to do what it does best: be at the forefront of liberal reforms in those EU areas which have been rusty for too long. Instead, it was all about putting pressure on well-meaning EU partners to solve Cameron's imaginary problem: EU migration to Britain. The deal was obviously trashed by British media, because it delivered little. But it was the most the EU could give to keep Britain in. At the end, the February summit was that uncomfortable conversation some weeks before a break-up: we could do better, if only you could change.

This is water under the bridge now, but London and Brussels do not seem to have learnt the lesson. They are heading for a nasty divorce. To be fair, there is little the EU can do to make things easier for Britain: being too lenient can be the end of the EU, as populist, Euroskeptic parties threaten to take over the Franco-German axis.

Theresa May is a woman in trouble: as a former Home Secretary, she knows what is at stake for her country's (and the EU's) security if a hard Brexit happens. She also campaigned to remain, so she now finds herself having to unsay what she said. She is not delusional, either: she knows that, whatever deal she may get, it will be less advantageous than the one she has now, unless she bows to accept unpalatable conditions such as the ECJ jurisdiction,

budgetary contributions and a generous regime for EU migrants. But, by acknowledging this, she risk alienating her backbenchers. As a Prime Minister whose main task is to take Britain out of the EU, that is a luxury she cannot afford. As a result, she remains vague, contradictory at times. And she sometimes let her ministers run wild. The alarming tone of last month's Conservative party conference (where ministers floated ideas such as declaring EU workers or deporting European doctors *en masse*) has convinced Brussels that a 'soft Brexit' (a less acrimonious divorce where both parties could benefit) is impossible. This is not necessarily the position of the British government, but Number 10 is doing nothing to tell its Brussels partners otherwise.

I do not see how this situation can be fixed unless somebody undertakes the Herculean task of repairing the broken line across the Channel. 'Experts' won't do it: the British public have apparently had enough of them. There are very few charismatic politicians who wish to put themselves in that position. For now, it is a game of wait-and-see. Let's hope this time, somebody eventually takes the time to make a call.