

Out of the Rift into the Unknown - A Survey of the BREXIT Process

Erhard Juerke

University of Applied Sciences and Arts Dortmund

Abstract:

Brexit is well under way and a lot of people on the continent cannot understand what has been going on in the UK. The decision to leave the EU is still widely perceived as an irrational and irresponsible result of a campaign directed by a circle of traditionalist eccentrics. The aim of this article is to trace the hidden rationale of the process that received momentum in the course of widening rifts between the UK and the EU at the international level and between traditionalist and modernist social groups inside the UK. The rifts laid the ground for a populist narrative which played a key role in the successful, though by no mean inevitable, outcome of the long-drawn Brexit campaign. In the final chapter the article explores the impact of the Brexit decision and the future options for Britain's role in Europe.

Introduction

In many respects the final years of the last decade were marked by a critical turning point in the history of relations between Great Britain and Europe. At the time of writing it is a near certainty that Brexit will happen, accompanied by seemingly strong, if not growing, support for the crude exit strategy of the Johnson government and an equally strong disbelief in the rationale behind this in the countries on the continent. It may be assumed that a rift of such massive dimensions, when put to close scrutiny, is likely to highlight significant differences in perspective amongst the long-term partners.

The objective of this article is to present Brexit as a possible, yet by no means inevitable, outcome of a historically grown constellation in social, economic and political terms. The survey begins with an exploration of the separation process in the analysis of British exceptionalism in the context of the historic development of relations between Britain and the European Union (EU). Proceeding from this analysis, there will be some reflections on the phenomenon that the essentially myth-based pro-Brexit narrative struck such a strong chord within large parts of the British population. The final part will assess some of the concepts for pathways towards redefining the relationship between Britain and Europe in the future.

In pursuing these aspects, the article will to a large extent draw from four recent books on the subject.

Two of these focus on British-European relations:

- Jeremy Black: Britain and Europe: A Short History. London 2019: Hurst & Co. (-B- in the references);
- Brendan Simms: Britain's Europe. A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation. London 2017: Penguin Books (-S- in the references).

The other two, both written by authors with long political experience, deal more closely with the actual Brexit process:

- Ivan Rogers: 9 Lessons in Brexit. London 2019: Short Books (-R- in the references);
- William Waldegrave: Three Circles into One. London 2019: Mensch Publishing (-W- in the references).

The context is provided by articles from the Guardian Weekly newspaper (-GW- in the references, alphabetical list below the article.)

The History of Britain in Europe

There have been few phases in European history in which Britain (or until 1707 England) has not been involved in or impacted by developments on the continent. Key chapters like the Nor-

man Conquest, the Hanoverian Kings, Waterloo, Trafalgar, Verdun or the Battle of Britain call to mind that, even if not all of these provided grounds for harmonic relations, they do serve as strong indicators that British and European history cannot really be separated. This remains true in spite of the long and deliberate cultural separation that has also permeated political atti-

tudes and became manifest in the frequent examples of British politicians' lack of interest in and understanding of continental matters (B 144).

Black distinguishes four defining elements of Europe, that have served to at least provide the British with a rough mental cartography (B 205). A relatively imprecise geographic view plus a similarly problematic value and ideology dimension manifest the general European orientation. This is to be distinguished from membership in the EU, implying participation in a framework of legal, administrative and political institutions, which for him are frequently not fit for purpose and whose ultimate objective raises manifold doubts. For Black the EU, as it is not synonymous with Europe, clearly requires a different sense of identity (B 206).

Simms is right to point out that there have been strong views on the EU in Great Britain and vice versa since the beginning of the European integration efforts, but that these, until recently, have never been at the heart of British minds (S 196,247). Economic interests have been at the forefront for most of the time, with any further political integration initiatives regarded with strong suspicions. This has been true for traditionalist forces in the Tory party, but certainly also for the left wing of the Labour Party, which still perceives the EU as an undemocratic capitalist bulwark against a pressurised working class.

Waldegrave alludes that it may have been the lack of interest and understanding in European affairs that led British politicians to largely ignore the passage in the Treaty of Rome that explicitly stated the founding members' objective of an "*ever closer union among the European peoples*" (W 12p.). In any case, with few exceptions, a sequence of governments from both

major parties appeared to agree on the irrelevance of integrationist continental ambitions and vied for membership in order to join the economic bandwagon, partly to make up for the loss of influence in terms of the commonwealth and relations with the US. Arguably de Gaulle's objections to British entry into what was then still the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1962 and 1967 served to feed anti-European sentiment, but this did not tarnish for good the attractions of European cooperation. Under prime ministers MacMillan, Heath, and Wilson the increasing loss of British influence in world affairs, both politically and economically, fostered a growing interest in the modernisation opportunities provided by the EEC. Issues with the Common Agricultural Programme (CAP) and the European Communities Act, which gave EEC law primacy over British law, resulted in public opinion volatility, which was later somewhat soothed by the 1975 referendum, in which 65 per cent of the electorate came out in favour of continued membership. The 1980s, with the Thatcher government's aggressive economic agenda and a profound distrust of all EEC activities going beyond business interests, did much to give new momentum to the sceptical forces in the Tory party. Under Labour prime minister Blair there ensued a short-lived 'British moment' in the European Union (EU), a fleeting period of harmony in which 'Cool Britannia' appeared to be at the vanguard of the modernisation efforts (S 205). It was not to last. Blair's endeavours to combine the EU engagement with the special US relationship resulted in his ignominious downfall in connection with the war on Iraq. What remained was an emerging liberal cosmopolitan culture in and around London, which provided a counterpoint to the traditional identity that was increasingly pressurised. (B 183) The UK as a whole experienced an extended period of economic stagnation, uninspired political leadership, austerity and growing pressures on the welfare network. And the progressing European integration was more and more perceived to be part of the problem rather than a potential solution to a generally unsatisfactory state of affairs.

British Exceptionalism: The Three Circles

Simms draws a distinction between the founding acts of the UK and the United States on the one hand and the European Union on the other hand. The former, in 1707 and 1776, resulted

from existential threats and respectively culminated in 'events', whilst the latter lacked a similar initiation point and was organised as a 'process' (S 228 pp.), with a humble beginning and high ambitions for the future. To what extent the UK really emerged as a united political entity cannot be discussed at length here. No doubt the close ties between England and Wales have a long historic base, whereas the cultural differences with Scotland were submerged by common political interests but have remained strong throughout. And as Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole has pointed out in a number of publications, the English attitude towards Northern Ireland has always been marred by a strong colonialist undercurrent and never reached an ade-

quate understanding of Irish specifics. Consequently, when categories like sovereignty and identity are analysed in this chapter, this implies a stronger reference to England rather than the other members or the United Kingdom as a political entity.

Rogers defines sovereignty as 'power of agency', implying control over laws, borders and money, based on legitimacy and accountability (R 22p.). This sovereignty, no doubt strengthened by the geography, has over centuries nourished a unique set of ideologies and a specific institutional framework. For a long period of history this implied a deliberate separation from developments on the continent and a predominantly inward-looking culture (B 144).

The traditional bases of British exceptionalism and the national narrative are well known. Any nation that had not been invaded for a millennium, that had for some time been the greatest military and economic power with the greatest empire in the world, benefitting from international stability and external 'splendid' isolation, that had excelled in standing alone against a mighty enemy in World War II, would have developed a particularly strong and distinct shared identity. Until today, there has therefore been a widespread interclass consensus and trust regarding the key institutional manifestations of this national culture. The conventions of royalty and nobility, parliament, the law and the public sector are still being met with a great deal of respect, not least from the underprivileged classes.

Waldegrave explains that this exceptional position and orientation of the UK is embodied in the notion of three circles of reference, first described by Winston Churchill in 1948. With reference to Churchill, for Waldegrave the first circle refers to the Commonwealth, which replaced the collapsed British empire (W 11). Britain's first major immigrant wave came from the countries of the former empire and has become a strong impact factor on British society. For some time, nostalgia and the ties to the Commonwealth played a certain role in British policies, but overall the role of the Commonwealth remains limited. For certain it did not serve as a substitute for the generation of pride.

The second circle is defined by the special relationship between the UK and the US, the latter in its role as the leading representative of the English-speaking world. For the UK this circle

has brought about a series of disillusionments and disappointments with the ruthlessness of post-war US policy, climaxing during the Suez crisis, the Iraq wars and the recent 'America First' project of the incumbent US president. In conclusion Waldegrave comes out in favour of removing the term special relationship "*from the dictionary of political clichés*" (W 16).

The third circle then refers to Europe. Simms and Black implicitly also argue within the three circles model, but put a stronger focus on the UK as a political entity, discussing its 'National compact' (S 224), endeavouring to find a new role and identity after the loss of its empire (S 207) and the declining relevance of the second circle.

It has frequently been pointed out that European integration has never been high on the agenda of British politics. This seems understandable, given the powerful unbroken tradition of going it alone successfully, which is in strong contrast to the experiences of the countries on the continent. In the British context it simply matters, that there has not been any invasion as precedent for the surrender of sovereignty. However, Britain was beginning to be faced with a massive dilemma: the empire was lost, the first and second circle were disintegrating, yet a stronger focus on the third circle would jeopardize the sovereignty idea (W 27). What did seem acceptable to large groups of the British people was to extract economic benefits from Europe without paying an undue political price. The years after British EEC entry in 1967 saw some

precarious ambiguities in this respect: between attempts to draw material benefit on the positive side contrasted by anger about the Common Agricultural Programme (CAP), about German industrial dominance, but also about integration measures, which were met with disbelief concerning their chance of success or even open resistance in the case of the Maastricht Treaty.

A massive conflict ranging right across the main parties emerged. At one end were the forces seeking to harness the EU for the essential and indeed necessary modernisation of British industry and society, to allow it to benefit from the European common market but also to enable it to face the new pressures of globalisation. This would certainly require some quid pro quo, i.e. pooling some sovereignty elements in order to gain and ensure economic competitiveness to participate in the overall globalisation process. At the other end were the Eurosceptics, who viewed the EU from quite different critical perspectives, as incompatible with British sovereignty, as an undemocratic German – French venture, or even in the words of a cabinet minister ‘a German racket’ aiming to implement Hitler’s idea of a European superstate by means of stealth.

In this context O’Toole draws attention to a deep structure of feelings that centres around interpretations of the impact of World War II on England. (GW f). Some form of substitute pride has emerged from the memory that Britain had lost the empire, but won the war. He describes the impact of literature and films to illustrate a combination of invasion fears and a sense British heroism, briefly revived by the Falkland War. The ensuing sentiment understood the efforts towards European integration as an attempt by a treacherous elite to sell English sovereignty to the loser of the War. Reviving the spirit of resistance and pride on fighting back the invasion attempt were to prove powerful factors in the growth of the anti-EU movement.

Indeed, the EU offered ample reasons to be viewed critically, with an ongoing integration process that included the Maastricht treaty, the introduction of the Euro and an increasingly dominant unified Germany. Of course, the EU has never less than a daring venture. Setting in motion a process aimed at eventually integrating various nations with widely different cultures

into one new state forms a challenge without precedence. It was unique from the start, it was going to be enormously complex and progress was slow to materialise. Arguably there are still striking deficiencies in terms of transparency and democracy. Yet the plans for integration have met with relatively little opposition in the central European counties (B 176).

The result was a dual rift: firstly, between a continental Europe on the way towards stronger integration and a UK becoming increasingly sidelined in this process, whose ultimate objectives it did not share. Simms sums this up in the assessment that the EU was out to fix something that was never broken in the UK (S 237). The second rift widened between cosmopolitan, modernising milieus and more traditionalist social groups trying to cope with new dimensions of pressures.

In the final chapter of his book Black sketches a portrait of a UK as it tries to adapt its identity to a changing environment:

“Related but also separate, a sense of community and continuity is crucial to the harmony of individuals and societies. It is challenged by the continual process of change, a process that entails the alteration, inventions and reinventions of traditions.” (B 210)

He sets out from the assumption that the EU is not in a position to provide a focus for such a new popular identity. It cannot elicit general consent, because it is undemocratic and essentially based on a myth. For him that myth of a common European identity entails elements of anachronism, teleology and reification, which served well in history to integrate nations around shared experience but could not function in a confederation (B 207). The conclusion is that the EU could not and cannot fulfil the above orientation needs of individuals and societies. And it is unacceptable in democratic terms to prescribe to nations and their elected leaders how they have to act as Europeans to fulfil the implications of a mere myth. This British side of the rift gained increasing momentum.

The Path to Brexit

In the early 2010s, Britain was still reeling under the effects of the global crisis that had hit the

financial markets some years before. Influenced by monetarist theories a succession of conservative governments imposed harsh austerity programmes with severe cutbacks in most state functions. Whilst these had a strong impact on local government, the police and the courts, those parts of the population that depended on state support were hit with particular force and perhaps even cruelty. Child poverty and homelessness increased massively, housing benefit was reduced. The National Health Service was exempted from the cutbacks, but did not rise above precarious standards, public sector pay was frozen or restricted for several years. (GW a)

A large part of the population, predominantly in England, felt neglected and even cheated by the establishment, with the traditional lifestyle being eroded by perceived foreign interference. Most strongly affected were the 'white and grey' people, white older members of the population with a lower educational background, that had been displaced and disoriented by the modernisation process, possibly living in fear of redundancies because their factories were struggling to cope with international competition, experiencing the harshness of a neglected welfare state, losing their social connection and orientations in a globalisation process dominated by anonymous forces. While the financial sector in the capital was recovering after 2010, British industry, centred in the Midlands and Northern England, continued to decline. Along with this, the old working class cultural network with powerful unions, clubs and various self-help societies was dying out. A journalist visiting East Derbyshire recorded her recent impressions:

"I saw up close what was left: warehouses and care work, bullying bosses, zero-hours contracts, poverty pay and social security top-ups. Smartphones to tell you whether you have a shift that morning and Facebook to give you then news and some dishonest fragment of it." (GW c 58)

Immigrant shopkeepers, restaurant servants and low-paid workers from the Commonwealth countries have influenced the decline of the traditional culture and the growth of traditionalist sentiments in cities like Bradford, Leeds and Sheffield. This has also been true for migrant labourers from EU countries like Poland. In fact, in this decade Polish migrants became the second largest group of foreigners in the country. And Europe was perceived as the root cause of the problem, with a return to British sovereignty as a simple and quick solution. Some solace

could be found in national pride and in a culture with traditional habits around smoking and drinking, prejudice against foreigners with clear racist elements and a nihilist attitude to politics. (GW e 36) And, addressing his part of the population, the emerging Brexit movement, and particularly the United Kingdom Independent Party (UKIP), depicted the British EU supporters as traitors and collaborators with an alien regime.

On the other side of the spectrum, the support for the EU process has mainly come from the younger, well-educated home-owning city dwellers, who enjoy greater international freedoms, not just in business and investment terms, but with a strong additional work and travel dimension (B 191p.). In defending the progress made in Europe, Timothy Garton Ash has described their freedoms:

“.. this is a continent where you can wake up on Friday morning, decide to take a budget flight to the other end of the continent, meet someone you like, settle down to study, work and live there, all the time enjoying the rights of the European citizen in one and the same legal, economic and political community” (GWd 41)

It is not hard to imagine how alien, in the sense of unachievable and undesirable, this urban lifestyle must have appeared to the traditionalists. Their sense of exclusion and neglect was channelled into an aggressive narrative that put British traditionalists against an elite that favours immigrants, Islamists or the EU. In his speeches, UKIP leader Nigel Farage distanced what he called ‘the people’ from the political class, represented by the big political parties centred in the capital, from industry and the banks, from the media and from a liberal intellectual elite that call them racists.

“We, the British people should be masters of our own destiny, running our own lives, in control of our own country.” (GE e 37)

It was certainly not overly difficult to create an anti-European narrative. After all, with hindsight, the decision of UK governments to leave the European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) in 1992 had turned out to be quite beneficial (B 178) and the refusal to join the Eurozone spared the country from being enmeshed in the long-drawn bail-out efforts for members with limited fiscal discipline. When the financial crisis after 2008 resulted in fiscal austerity pro-

grammes in Britain, the EU response was focused on austerity as well, but EU-wide and combined with intensified convergence efforts (B 186). The continental European narrative, based on the myth of a shared European identity embodied by the EU institutions (B 206) and specified as peace and prosperity in a war torn area with common roots secured by a federation, did not strike much of chord with large parts of the British population that were seeking to find a new identity in line with the very different traditions. It is also true, that, for a majority of the people living in Europe, the EU had still not succeeded in at least supplementing the identity bases of the member nations with a shared European identity in the second decade of the century. In no other country was this failure more evident than in the UK.

There is no denying that the UK benefitted from the common market, from subsidies and new freedoms of international travel, study and work, yet during the austerity period this was only perceived to a limited extent. In addition, the EU gave the British a lot of reasons for dissatisfaction. The acceptance of new members, the dominance of a perceived German – French informal alliance, the Social Charter, the free movement of labour, the asylum policies, together with unjustified membership fees created a growing dimension of anger. At another

level the increasing amount of EU legislation with unchanged limited national involvement, the lack of transparency and the efforts towards greater integration, continued to strengthen the critics.

Euro-scepticism grew, because it was fed as a distraction from austerity (B 153), but equally because of EU shortcomings. In the course of the decade Britain and the EU were clearly drifting even further apart, and with this the balance between pro-European and anti-European forces in Britain became increasingly precarious. Not least because this began to affect the Kingdom with an additional rift opening between England and Scotland. In such divisive times with tense constellations the integrational power of the constitutional framework is called for. The quest for reconciliation, however, has turned out to be a challenge that the British institutions have not lived up to so far.

In their manifesto for the 2009 European Elections the Conservative Party still came out in

general support of EU enlargement, and in Westminster the coalition with the strongly pro-European Liberal Democrats served to keep eurosceptics around the UKIP with its charismatic leader Nigel Farage at bay. Increasingly, however, unease began to spread, particularly about large-scale immigration waves of asylum seekers and labour migrants from EU member states. Prime Minister Cameron eventually gave in to the pressures and pledged an EU referendum in the 2015 general election, probably in the expectation that, in a continued coalition, the LibDems would never accept this. Yet, he unexpectedly won an overall majority, a strategic problem evolved from a tactical move. The referendum was called for 2016. The campaign of the Prime Minister and the 'Remainers' clearly lacked drive, with the LibDems weakened, Labour and the Tories being split on this issue, and the liberal, cosmopolitan groups largely inert because of the assumption that a pro-EU vote was a foregone conclusion.

The outcome is known. With hindsight, there is a range of reasons to explain the triumph of the 'Brexiters'. They had a highly professional campaign team and more effective leaders with Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson, the latter having kept an open mind about his Brexit stance for a very long time. A powerful connection was established between austerity problems and EU membership, with a slogan on the campaign buses that promised 350 million pounds each week to flow into the NHS instead of EU contributions. It did not matter that the implied promise did not stand up to scrutiny, it proved a powerful part of the message. Not least, because the range of new media available allowed both camps to create their own reality concepts, respectively confirming the attitudes and prejudices of their supporters. Perhaps the decisive element of the pro-Brexit campaign was UKIP's notorious poster, which displayed a mass of Syrian refugees marching towards the viewer with the appeal to break free from the EU and take back control: 'Breaking Point: The EU has failed us all.' Euroscepticism had turned into outright hostility against the EU and the 'Remainers'.

In political terminology, the definitions of populism include a sense of betrayal by the establishment that can be turned into voting power in times of crisis, particularly when the main parties converge on the central issues (GW h11). Overall, however, it seems that identity orientations outweighed the economic arguments, in the sense defined by Younge as a shared

identity that reduces politics to individual experience. (GW i46) The leaders of the campaign cleverly presented their populist argument that the simple, single solution to immigration fears, economic uncertainties, erosions of sovereignty and identity and frustrations with European integration was Brexit. The appeal to the underprivileged classes that have lost their fighting power and trust in the economic concepts of the establishment was effective. The anti-EU message provided a proposal for national identity and social orientation, with a crude xenophobic and racist ingredient justifying the exclusion of undesired foreigners. At another level populism regards its followers as objects, it carries solutions from above, from focused single-minded leaders that, even though they are usually members of the establishment, present themselves as the champions of 'the people' against the cosmopolitan sections of the middle classes. This element of the Brexit appeal was supported by a modern IT based public relations machine that was strong enough to create its own tailor-made and simple realities that proved largely resistant to factual counterevidence. Brexit played on the common myth that the removal of an alien impostor force would result in the automatic return of the natural order and connected this with another myth that, in the words of a campaign slogan, it would be possible to 'Make Britain great again'. The exit from the EU implied the rejection of an interconnected world, with a mythical appeal to British greatness, enabling the country to go it alone, even at the possible cost of some economic disadvantages. In the Brexit narrative the backward orientation covered the striking limitations of the concept for the future. A sentimental appeal to national exceptionalism proved more forceful than the rational counterposition pointing to economic consequences. In fact, for the pro-EU milieus, the populist narrative appeared so crude and hard to match with the facts that many supporters of continued EU membership failed to take it seriously and therefore did not even bother to vote (W 26).

So, in 2016, 52 per cent of the voters, representing 44% of the electorate, cast their vote in favour of Brexit. A decision based on such a small majority is in line with the traditional first-past-the post system. On the other hand, it may be imagined that such a crucial decision with wide-ranging consequences would justify the requirement of perhaps a two-thirds majority. This might have made sense, yet it would still not have reflected the divisions brought forward by the result: London, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted remain, with Wales and the north

of England representing the Brexit strongholds (B 190p.). The country has been torn between parts that see a future within the EU and parts that prefer to go it alone, between modernisers and traditionalists, between a liberal, cosmopolitan and a nationalist culture.

In Waldegrave's words, the destruction of one paradigm does not automatically create an alternative one (W 59). The ensuing years confirmed the utter lack of a strategy behind the Brexit decision in the severance negotiations with the EU, supporting Rogers' view that the UK drivers of Brexit had never understood the complexity of the process. The years after 2016 also saw the deadlock between a parliament with a stronger opposition since the 2017 elections and a weakened government. The Brexiteers managed to present this as a conflict between the people and parliament, supported by the law courts. This cast some doubts on the continued functionality of the British constitutional system. If anything, it sharpened the divisions inside the country rather than contributing to overcome them in a quest to identify a new base for consensus. The 2019 elections strengthened the internal rift, producing a clear majority for the pro Brexit government and clearing the obstacles to a break-up with the EU.

A look back to the beginning of the previous decade serves to highlight the dimensions of the changes for the UK, with an outcome that very few would have foreseen in 2010. Clearly there were strong trends supporting a growing alienation both inside and outside the UK, that gave the eventual outcome a certain logic. Arguably, the EU leaders played their role in this development. It is true, the EU was facing a range of massive problems at the middle of the decade, and support for the Remainers in Britain was lukewarm at best. Black concludes that Cameron's efforts to gain some concessions to strengthen his position in the referendum resulted in 'total defeat' (B 188). The decisive factor in Britain was the channelling of frustrations, uncertainties and fears into a populist movement. But this does not mean that Brexit was inevitable, it was by no means the only possible result of the dynamics triggered by the political decisions after 2015. The results of the referendum and the three general elections could well have brought about different constellations with a different Labour Party and a stronger willingness of pro-European forces to cooperate. Cameron did not have to call a referendum in 2016 and he could, with a degree of justification, have set a minimum require-

ment for Brexit. Politicians that were to become decisive figures in the Brexit campaign could have imagined that seeking a consensus with the other camp provided greater career opportunities for them. Prime Minister May could have tried harder to overcome the deadlock with parliament with a stronger effort to find a common ground. All of these factors, plus probably a few more, might have paved the way towards alternative outcomes. However, as Rogers has it, “*there is no way to re-write history*” (R 15). On the other hand, Brexit was no chance event. It started out as a precarious constellation emerging from a growing rift between the UK and the EU. Within this constellation a dynamic was set in motion, the outcome of which was decided by the more powerful narrative promoted by the Brexiteer camp. It has to be considered though, that the Brexit motivations were largely more personal than political, but that emotional is not the same as empirical (GW i). In essence a narrative is no more than a story, and the highly deficient factual substance of the Brexit narrative offers strong grounds for future concerns. Yet, now the Brexit train is under way. What is left to do is assess the impact of the venture and envisage the destination options.

The Impact and the Options

In their books, all written prior to the 2019 general elections, some of the authors outline what they regard as the serious consequences of the Brexit decision. Rogers criticises that the populist notion of sovereignty was linked to the immigration issue while neglecting the damage this imposes on trade (R 65), yet sees no ground for optimism that the Tory government will move towards a new interpretation of sovereignty inside the EU (R 29). He diagnoses a grave crisis, based on deep divisions and necessitating dramatic change (R 9pp.). With a long practical experience in UK-EU diplomatic relations, his central focus is a sceptical overall assessment of the post-Brexit transition period. He explains his critical view with reference to the UK government’s lack of understanding regarding the complexity of the issues. This goes together with a “*ludicrous, unachievable deadline for a complete regime change*” (R 41), with the main problem in the services field. For him, this is aggravated by “*all manner of delusions, fantasies and self-deceptions.*” (R 12). Rogers concludes that the requirements for a successful Brexit transition period are not in place yet. The recent decision of the British government to cap the

length of this period feeds doubts in terms of a competent handling and a successful outcome of the process. The learning outcome of his '9 Lessons in Brexit' is that the transition period is highly likely to end in failure.

Waldegrave, a former Tory cabinet minister, deeply regrets the undeniable differences in orientations between the UK and the EU, setting off the process that ended in Brexit and manifesting the breakup of the last of the three circles (W 33). He is critical of his fellows in the political establishment, blaming them for a series of failures. In the first place they ignored the objectives of the EU, they reacted to the 2008 financial crisis with austerity measures that paved the way for the Brexit movement (W 28), they failed to work out a plan or even give a sense of direction. The EU narrative in the UK went wrong (W 30) but the alternative was dysfunctional, because "*the winning disruptors had no plan*" (W 64). Now, with the collapse of the three circles, on which British exceptionalism was founded, there is no longer a national community consensus, the trusted institutions and respected conventions have become highly fragile. The growing instability brought about by Brexit is posing a threat to the political culture. He specifies this with descriptions of the new pressures on parliament, the public sector, the Bank of England the Law, the Queen and the electoral system.

Simms' interprets Brexit a "*a renewed national compact with serious problems*" (S 224), based on an exceptionalism that will not sacrifice sovereignty and is prepared to pay an economic price for that stance (S 237). He envisages a long-term perspective based on his distinction between unifications organised as a process, as with the EU, or as an event, as with the union between England and Scotland and the foundation of the USA. A system that builds coherence through a system of fiscal and political measures is doomed to fail because it puts rules before democratic participation. His proposal is for continental Europe to give up its '*gradualist fallacy*' (S 229) in order to learn from the British and US model and re-organise itself with an event. This would involve a political union transcending national identity, reconciling regions and centre, with a parliament, a government and an army. The '*new grand settlement*' (S 240) would also provide a base for a new partnership with the UK, which will never give up its exceptionalism. The concept is no doubt original, yet it fails to consider the obstacles at the

European end, the social changes inside the UK, and the pressures on sovereignty in a rapidly changing globalised world.

So where will the UK be heading in the 2020s?

There is first of all a major question mark behind the future of the UK as a nation state. The endeavours to generate Brexit out of the rift between the UK and the EU did a lot to sharpen the rift between England and the other members of the UK. The grounds for Welsh Independence are likely to remain relatively weak and may be contained with some additional concessions for the Welsh Assembly. On the other hand, Scottish independence will constitute a major issue in the coming years. The 1707 union was based on mutual interests, now the interests are in open conflict. After all the same arguments in favour of sovereignty that the UK raised against the EU may be used by pro-European Scotland against the exiting UK. In Scotland a new dynamic towards independence is gaining increasing momentum. The 2019 general elections evidenced solid support for the SNP and a just cause that make it hard for the government to reject calls for a second referendum. The same election gave indications of a growing Irish nationalist force in Northern Ireland, which may be fostered by unclear passages in the Brexit act.

The long term options for a national re-orientation and a re-definition of the relationship with Europe will obviously to a large extent depend on the developments inside the European Union. These are likely to be wide-ranging and would require a separate survey, which would move

beyond the focus of this text. This reservation must be considered in the discussion of the various long-term perspectives for the UK discussed by Waldegrave.

- 'Singapore on Thames' (W 83pp.)

This option describes a UK wholly outside the EU. It is a free-trading tax haven with strong attractions for financial investment and a high-skilled workforce. The currency exchange rate would be kept low to make up for tariffs to be paid to the EU and increasingly other regions of the global market. Waldegrave believes this model might be attractive for parts of the Remain

culture in terms of economics and finance. Upon critical analysis, a model based on a narrative that prioritises wealth over democracy and freedom would however be a hard sell to the traditionalist supporters of Brexit. The social groups that ensured victory for Brexit would end up being the biggest losers with this option.

- A return to the special relationship with the US (W 93pp.)

A revival of the second circle has been invoked by both the US and the UK heads of government. A bi-lateral trade agreement would substitute the trade relations with the EU, with even fewer control mechanisms remaining for the UK. After all, experience has shown that establishing trade relations with the US may turn out to be a rather painful process, in particular under the principle of 'America First'. A UK tired of being governed by EU regulations would find itself being governed by even tougher US regulations against what the superpower would regard as a trading partner of minor significance.

- A return into the EU (W 97pp.)

This option would be the one most closely connected with the direction the EU is going to take in the coming years. It may look unreal at first glimpse. Would it still, if the transition negotiations failed and the early effects of Brexit turned out to be a lot more painful than expected and promised? Would that perhaps arouse forces that might have sufficient power to assert a new referendum? This option would avoid a break-up of the UK union. Waldegrave laments the decline of the constitutional system and wonders about the possible benefits of reconstruction within a modern Europe (W 102). This fresh approach might settle the exceptionalism issues around the three circles, but the Brexiteers would certainly not hesitate

to add a powerful betrayal myth to their populist agenda that, Waldegrave fears, may end up in violent conflict (W 103). This seemingly attractive option has therefore to be regarded as ultimately unrealistic.

- A limited positive role in Europe and elsewhere (W 107pp.)

Waldegrave envisages a scenario in which the UK has left the EU and is possibly reduced to a

political entity made up of England and Wales. It has dispensed with all longings for power formerly entrenched in the three circles. It has modernised its constitutional framework with a larger number of written parts, which can serve to mediate between former Leavers and Remainers. It would possess a new national narrative in line with its traditions and values aiming to be an esteemed partner in Europe and elsewhere in the world. In short:

“... a medium-sized, wealthy, well-run modern nation, a centre of civilized living and a member of every sensible alliance, aimed for example, at climate control, or mutual European defence“ (W 123).

It may of course be possible that none of these scenarios becomes reality. Given the long tradition and the proven resilience of the constitutional elements, the 2020s may also see a period of Conservative Party dominance, with a largely unchanged constitutional framework combined with extended political and social integration proposals. Whatever happens, Britain will not cease to be an important part of Europe after Brexit. Or, in Black’s words:

“Britain is a European country, but that does not dictate any particular political arrangement” (B 193).

Articles

Referenced articles from the *Guardian Weekly*

GWa) Chakraborty, Aditya. It took a UN envoy to record Britain’s decade of poverty shame. Vol. 199 No. 25, 23 November 2018: 45p.

GWb) Chakraborty, Aditya. Britain is in the grip of an existential crisis that goes beyond Brexit. Vol. 200 No. 26, 7 June 2019: 48p.

GWc) Chakraborty, Aditya, Labours’s election meltdown has been building for decades. Vol. 201 No 2., 20 December 2019: 57p.

GWd) Garton Ash, Timothy, Europe. It's too important to fail. Vol. 200 No. 23, 17 May 2019: 40-44

GWe) Hattenstone, Simon, Out and proud. Vol. 200 No. 6, 18 January 2019: 34-39

GWf) O'Toole, Fintan, The paranoid fantasy of Brexit. Vol. 199 No. 26, 30 November 2018: 40-44

GWh) Rooduijn, Matthiajs, The new populism. Vol. 199 No. 26, 30 November 2018: 10p.

GWi) Younge, Gary, It's time to retire the phrase 'identity politics' for good. Vol. 199 No. 19, 12 October 2018: 45p.

Über den Autor

Dr. Erhard Jürke war bis 2018 Dozent für Business English, Deutschlandstudien, Business Ethics/CSR am Fachbereich Wirtschaft der Fachhochschule Dortmund.

<https://www.fh-dortmund.de/de/fb/9/personen/lehr/juerke/index.php>