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An Historical Perspective on Brexit: Six Theories

An Historical Perspective on Brexit: Six Theories

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The United Kingdom and the European Union are just weeks ahead of the 31 October 2019 deadline when Brexit is supposed to happen. The future is yet to be written but it may be interesting to adopt a historical perspective. By doing so, I would like to propose the following six theories:

1. The UK has never really found its proper place within the construction of Europe

The country was not interested in participating in the creation of the European Communities in the 1950s. Even worse, it tried to sabotage the creation of the Common Market with an alternative project to create a large free trade area in Western Europe. When it noticed that the European venture was starting to bear fruit, it asked to join the Communities twice in the 1960s, only to be repelled by a French veto under General de Gaulle. After the General's era came to an end, the door opened to the UK, which signed its accession treaty in 1972 and joined on 1 January 1973. The Labour divisions in 1975 led to the first referendum, confirming accession by a two-to-one margin. Great tensions then arose around the amount of the British budget contribution, which would be resolved by an agreement reached in 1984 between Margaret Thatcher and her continental partners. The first period of the post-1984 revival—which centred on the completion of the internal market—may have seemed like a sort of honeymoon between Britain and Europe. Yet it soon became clear that Margaret Thatcher and her partners had a diverging vision of Europe's future. For the Iron Lady, the transatlantic connection was paramount and the European project should not develop towards social and tax harmonisation, monetary union and political union. Margaret Thatcher's successors could not or did not want to block further European developments, but the UK was exempted from economic and monetary union and stayed out of the Schengen area. Tensions worsened during the Cameron government.

2. It is a sort of paradox that the development of the EU has largely been congruent to British theories on Europe

The European Union, as it stands today, owes an important share of its distinctive characteristics to British influence. The fact that the internal market has stayed at the core of the European project and that the EU resolutely chose the path of enlargement in the 1990s and 2000s was heavily due to the influence of the UK. A European Union with a liberal credo that puts more emphasis on European economic integration than on building a strong political union is congruent with British views. For the developments it did not like but could not stop, such as the euro and Schengen, the UK was able to secure permanent exemptions.

3. From a geostrategic perspective, Brexit appears hard to understand

The last invasion of Britain from the Continent occurred in 1066. In spite of a couple of serious threats over the centuries (the Spanish Armada, Napoleonic wars, Nazi threat), the country was able to preserve its independence. In parallel, it was often involved in continental affairs with the supreme objective to prevent the rise of a hegemon. Developing its naval mastery and astutely dividing the European states brought British influence to new heights. The Industrial Revolution did the rest. The 18th and 19th centuries belonged to Britain. In the interwar years of the 20th century the federalist idea became very popular in Britain and, in 1946, Sir Winston Churchill pronounced his famous Zurich speech where he advocated the creation of the United States of Europe that would be a key partner of Imperial Britain and the USA. The transformation of the Empire into a Commonwealth of sovereign nations and the geostrategic withdrawal of the UK should have meant its mooring to the Continent. This happened, but always with nostalgia and second thoughts. Nevertheless, the UK was able to become one of the important agents of the European integration process. Its turning aside from the EU takes place in a new period of global geostrategic uncertainties where continental alliances become more and more important.

4. The country has been deeply divided over the issue of Brexit

Within the UK, we know the deep divisions between regions (England and Wales voted in favour of

Brexit in the June 2016 referendum; Scotland and Northern Ireland against), but also between core and periphery and between younger and older. The referendum campaign was overemotional and filled with fake or oversimplified news. The media brought their influence to the debate. Emotions led to a surge of populism and nationalism. And so British Realpolitik was put to an end after centuries of dominance. Even if the hypothetical organisation of a new referendum in the future could very well bring a different result than in 2016, passion and excess would probably not diminish any time soon.

5. The divisions over Europe within the Conservative Party over the last 30 years have been an important factor on the way to Brexit

Conservative divisions have led in some way or another to the fall of all their Prime Ministers since Margaret Thatcher in 1990. The European issue has been the most antagonising factor for the Conservatives over the last three decades. The will of successive party leaders to maintain partisan unity and to avoid being overtaken by the right has borne heavy costs. When David Cameron chose to give guarantees to the Europhobic wing of his party by leaving the European People's Party ahead of the 2009 European elections, he isolated it from precious partners on the Continent. When he was the only one in the European Council to reject the Fiscal Compact at a time of acute crisis, he forced his partners to act without him, increasing his isolation. When he announced in 2013 his will to organise a referendum on Brexit should he win the next general election (which he did), he paved the way for losing control of a self-initiated process three years later.

6. The use of the referendum device has not been well thought out

The 2016 referendum on Brexit was the third organised in the UK, and the second one dealing with membership of the EU (the first one taking place in 1975). The main reason for its organisation by the Cameron government was to try to transcend the internal divisions of the Conservative Party. The global result of the 2016 referendum led to a score of 51.9% in favour of Brexit. In a democracy, this is a majority. But is it possible to put such a complex issue to a vote when the answer can only be binary? As a result, it inflamed UK politics and could even threaten the unity of the Kingdom. A country such as Switzerland has had considerable experience of semi-direct democracy as the current mechanisms were established during the second part of the 19th century. Arguably, we may say from that experience that it works less efficiently the more political polarisation is developed and the more ideological visions take precedence over pragmatic and reasoned choices. There are two other lessons. Firstly, it is important to ask the proper question to voters. In the case of leaving the EU, it is no less important to know what the final destination of the journey will be, i.e. what kind of future relationship the UK and the EU will establish. Secondly, a popular vote should never be considered as making a decision that will have to apply forever. If the circumstances do change, it is not unwise to organise a new vote.

Conclusion

Brexit will arguably be bad news for the UK and for the EU. It should be no consolation to the EU to know that the UK would actually lose more. Ireland will be set to suffer heavily from a hard Brexit and no one wants the old conflicts of the past to resurge. Who could really think that the utopia of "Global Britain" or a renewed and deepened special relationship with the USA could replace the close ties developed with Continental Europe? Centrifugal forces could very well break apart the UK and a hard Brexit would have very bad economic consequences. It is sometimes tempting to believe that a European Union deprived of its most turbulent member could thrive in the future. Perhaps, but perhaps not. Even without the UK, the Union is deeply divided. The EU must regain a sense of purpose for its citizens and transcend the intergovernmental reflexes of its member states. The EU as a legal order endowed with strong common institutions can help defend values and act as a regulator of globalisation, thus allowing the continent to defend its interests in a new, uncertain and dangerous world. In this regard, Brexit could aggravate Europe's weakness on the world stage.

The views expressed in this article reflect the position of the author and not necessarily the one of the Brexit Institute Blog

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