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Brexit Negotiations and European Disintegration

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Although the Covid-19 pandemic knocked Brexit of its long-held Number 1 spot on the UK government's to-do list (EU representatives always liked to pretend they had bigger fish to fry, but it was pretty important to the EU too), negotiations over the UK's withdrawal from the EU are continuing up until October.

This is the so-called 'transitional period' from the date of the UK's official withdrawal from the EU's institutions on 31 January 2020 until the 31 December. By this date the EU and the UK will have smoothed the loss of access to the Single Market for the UK, and the EU will have mitigated the loss of one of its major economies, by securing a series of amicable deals and agreements.

Or not.

It might not come as a surprise to learn that the negotiations are not going well. Michel Barnier regularly briefs about his disappointment at the lack of progress over issues such as fisheries, whilst Sir David Frost says that things are going well despite difficulties. Such pessimism and optimism are in inverse proportion to the desired outcomes of both sides in the negotiations: the EU wants a deal; the UK doesn't.

Of course, this could all be grandstanding as part of the negotiation strategies of both sides. But if we see European integration – and disintegration – as more than just inter-governmental bargaining, then we have to account not only for domestic politics and policy preference formation, but of the politicisation of integration and the collapse of support for the EU within major political parties.

Aside from Labour in the 1970s, the Conservatives are the most significant mainstream party where internal disaffection with the EU reached sufficient levels to force a withdrawal from the EU – assisted by the UK Independence Party (UKIP) and its successor the Brexit Party. This was because – to mis-quote Margaret Thatcher – there was an alternative.

Political elites in many other EU member-states have felt for a long time that, for a variety of different historical or geo-strategic reasons, membership of the EU was the only game in town. This idea waned in British politics because the Eurosceptic and Thatcherite tradition always saw the English-speaking peoples – newly re-dubbed as the Anglosphere – as an alternative pole for the UK's trading ambitions. The idea that Tony Abbott might head up the revived Board of Trade (an entity dating back to the 17th century and revamped in 1784 to oversee the activities of the East India Company in Bengal) should give you a sense of the imaginaries operating in Downing Street on this issue.

Further evidence of the type of imaginaries occupying the official mind were given by Sir David Frost. Speaking in Brussels in early 2020 he explained the origins of Brexit in language that people in the 16th century would understand:

Brexit was surely above all a revolt against a system – against as it were, an ‘authorised version’ of European politics ... in which there is only one way to do politics and one policy choice to be made in many cases and against a politics in which the key texts are as hard to read for the average citizen as the Latin Bible was at the time of Charles the Bold (Frost, 2020).¹

Imaginaries matter in such accounts for the origins of this aspect of European disintegration, just as they mattered at the origins of European integration in the 1940s and 1950s. What seemed like a pipe dream of a few committed advocates came to pass. Craig Parsons showed how some ideas win out over others, take institutional form and survive (Parsons, 2003: 5).² This is why we have the EU we have today. Other ideas lose out and wither, which is why we didn't get the European Defence Community in 1954, or the EEC as ‘Eurafrique’ with Algeria as a full member.

But as this historical sketch suggests, disintegration and dysfunctionality are part of the normality of the history of European integration. As Kiran Klaus Patel recently argued, such twists and turns are nothing new: ‘All that is new is that they are shaping the debate over the European Union more strongly than ever before’ (Patel, 2020: 230).³

¹ Frost, David. ‘David Frost Lecture: Reflections on the Revolution in Europe’, *No10 Media Blog*, 17 February 2020: <https://no10media.blog.gov.uk/2020/02/17/david-frost-lecture-reflections-on-the-revolutions-in-europe/>, accessed 29 June 2020.

² Parsons, Craig, 2003. *A Certain Idea of Europe*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

³ Patel, Kiran Klaus. 2020. *Project Europe. A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

This is not reason to retreat into the complacent mantra that European integration will proceed via crises. Instead we should recognise that disintegration is an under-recognised part of the integration process, downplayed by those promoting a narrative of ever closer union. Instead as the EU-UK negotiations over the transitional period play out, we should look to Brexit as the most salient example of a long-established element of the process of European disintegration and examine the drivers of such politics. When the UK finally joins Algeria, Greenland and Saint-Barthelémy on the list of 'leavers', it will be the political imaginaries in a disintegrating UK that historians will attribute to the desire to leave, not fishing quotas in the North Sea.

Ben Wellings is an expert on Brexit and the politics of nationalism and Euroscepticism in contemporary Europe. His current research focuses on the relationship of nationalism in contemporary England to Brexit and the Anglosphere. He writes regularly for *The Conversation*, *the Globe and Mail* and *The Drum* on Brexit, English nationalism, Euroscepticism and the politics of the European Union. In 2012 he debated one of the leaders of the UK's Brexit Campaign, Daniel Hannan MEP in Auckland: Watch his debate with Daniel Hannan MEP at the New Zealand Initiative in May 2012 and his 2019 Bloomberg interview on Brexit [here](#). Before joining Monash University in 2013 he was the Convenor of European Studies at the Australian National University from 2004.

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