

The UK's Twelve Months of Brexit

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As we come to the close of the festive period for Leavers, also known as the Twelve Months of Brexit, it might be time to make up the balance of what joyous tidings this deliverance from EU-hegemony has brought the world. Unfortunately, the advent of baby Brexit came amidst a pox from on high, the dreaded corona pandemic, which has muddied the waters somewhat when looking at the economic and societal impact. But in the spirit of Boris Johnson's reign, which won't let corona get in the way of Christmas and of a party, let's blithely push on.

The corona pandemic became one of the first measures of how well the UK was doing outside the EU when a row broke out at the beginning of 2021, just weeks after the end of the post-Brexit transition period, over the supply of the Astra Zeneca vaccine. The UK had taken an early lead with its vaccination programme and the EU was lagging behind badly. Much of the UK's early success was due to its very own Oxford vaccine, manufactured by Astra Zeneca. The tug of war between London and Brussels over supplies of the vaccine took on ugly nationalist overtones that may well have been exacerbated by Brexit. Had the UK still been inside the EU, surely a common programme would have been worked out. It was an early sign of the fractiousness that has come to characterise post-Brexit relations in the year after the transition period that ended on 1 January 2021.

The vaccine row as well as the UK's lead, melted away later in the year, as first the bloc and then the UK too, switched to the newer mRNA vaccines. In terms of the economic damage from corona, for which the efficacy of the vaccine programme can be viewed as one mitigating factor, the picture is more than merely muddled. The EU is doing better than the UK, with the bloc having actually surpassed its GDP from before corona by October this year while the UK's economy was still 0.5 percent behind. That said, the economic impact of Brexit is hitting the UK far harder (and also probably for longer) than it is hurting growth in the EU. Factoring this in could mean that purely looking at corona, the UK has performed about as well or slightly better than the EU but there's probably not much in it.

Corona has pushed the direct impact of Brexit to the margins for large swathes of the public awareness. Even though there has been a series of issues that have directly impacted most UK households, such as some food and fuel shortages, their occurrence in the midst of a pandemic will have blunted the immediacy and the extent of the linkage with Brexit. Polls have shown that, if anything, Remainer and Leaver attitudes have hardened. The Lib Dems won the North Shropshire by-election despite, not because of, their Remain stance. Many Brexit voting Conservative voters stayed at home rather than support Johnson's venal governance variant. It was sleaze, not Leave that made the difference.

It seems clear that at some point, English voters – I say English because Tory dominance is not a UK-wide phenomenon – will get fed up again with the Conservative Party's propensity to become tone deaf to what really matters even to its own backers. But this does not mean that attitudes to Europe will drastically change or will determine the outcome of the next couple of elections. Only when younger voters in a sufficiently post-corona world will start yearning for the ease of access to Europe that has been lost, for work, study etc., might that equation change.

Going from the first months of Brexit, i.e. the vaccine rows, to the last months of Brexit, the Norths Shropshire by-election, is a bit of a leap and could create the impression that not much else has happened in between. But that's far from the truth, every month, nay, almost every week, if not every day, has brought fresh Brexit-related ructions. There were large lines of lorries being stuck in

Kent, and Dutch customs confiscating lorry drivers' ham sandwiches. There was the perennial and seemingly existential struggle over the Northern Protocol and the 'sausage wars'. There were the fish wars, the French protest flotilla off Jersey, the French detaining a British trawler and threatening customs slowdowns at Calais. There was Amsterdam briefly overtaking the City as Europe's largest stock exchange, but there's still not a comprehensive financial services agreement and it looks as if there's not going to be one anytime soon, if ever. There was a controversial and not very significant trade deal with Australia but a deal with the US is still nowhere in sight. There was actually agreement on the UK's participation in the EU's Horizon science research programme, until that was scuppered by all of the above, particularly the Northern Ireland Protocol.

The list goes on and on but what should not go unmentioned is a legislative onslaught by the UK government against individual and collective rights that are anchored in the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Court for Human Rights, a non-EU institution that has nevertheless become a target for hard Brexiteers. First and foremost among the proposed changes is a new Human Rights Act, that will be aimed at such nearly non-existent problems as making it easier to deport criminals with a foreign nationality or vague and worrying concepts such as "reducing the pull-factor" for migrants. This comes on top of what is seen as a distinctly illiberal crime and policing bill that will significantly curb the right to protest, among other things. Add to that the proposal for demanding voters' photo IDs – which is not uncommon in Europe but in the UK's different bureaucratic framework for IDs comes down to voter suppression – and a clear direction of travel away from the liberal West-European consensus in the 12 months of Brexit becomes clear.

The 12 months of Brexit appropriately end with the resignation of the UK's Brexit negotiator, David Frost. He represented not so much the country as the hard-line wing of the Conservative party during his tenure. With other Brexiteers still baying from the sidelines and Johnson's bumbling populism it is hard to blame him solely for the acrimonious tone of the negotiations but he surely bears his share of the responsibility. The UK government has already dropped hints that it now seeks to lower the temperature and while Frost conveniently blamed his disagreement with COVID restrictions for his departure, it is as former Lib Dem leader Vince Cable writes in the Independent, more likely that the hard-line negotiator chose to step back rather than lose face. Thus, it perfectly symbolises the UK's position at the end of these 12 months of Brexit.