

Iceberg Brexit

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It's a safe bet to say that Brexit has been much less at the forefront of people's mind both in the UK and the rest of Europe since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. By a safe bet, I mean of course the totally unwarranted kind of supposition that is now regularly deployed as hard fact by the Anglo-American political classes. Still, a quick and scientifically haphazard search of news headlines infuses me with the strong conviction that I must be right.

Rather than rail against this fading of Brexit from the collective consciousness, I welcome it. Why keep harping on it when it's clearly become irrelevant. The COVID-19 crisis comes as a godsend for both UK and European politicians who will want to fudge the impact of Britain definitively saying goodbye to the mainland.

It has already been noted that corona is the cover *par excellence*, pardon my French, for whatever economic disaster will follow. Crashing car exports to Europe? Corona! Tourism wiped out? Corona. A jump in food prices? Corona! And of course, who can now really gauge the impact of Brexit on just-in-time production process that have been disrupted anyway?

But there's a flipside to the corona coin that can be deployed by European governments and the EU. The economic impact of Brexit was going to be felt in at least several EU-countries as well. This would have been a reason for the EU to try and mitigate the damage and go relatively easy on the UK.

Now, Brexit economic disruption will be rolled into the much larger economic impact of corona. Also, what's another few billion Euros to compensate for Brexit on the whole huge corona bill? The EU has much less reason now to play nice with the UK. Rather the opposite, in the wake of the inter-European lack of solidarity, it needs to bolster its

internal cohesion, and what better way than to make a fist against a new outside power?

Cynics will say that Boris's Brexit shenanigans are behind much of the government's Covid-19 response and that therefore Brexit remains relevant. But how long can we carp on about ministers failing to join the EU's PPE procurement scheme? Let's just put that down to inexperience. Exactly the kind of inexperience in dealing with larger international questions, such as trade negotiations etc., that will determine whether the UK will be able to manage decently outside the EU.

And anyway, surely the government will have learnt from this and will make sure to be at the forefront of Europe-wide roll-outs of vaccines and cures if and when they arrive? Well, maybe not but who needs the EU, or the fabled billions that were to become available for the NHS after Brexit, now that this Conservative government has flayed the health service and is wearing its skin as a trophy?

The latest proof of Brexit-driven corona-policy might well be the rules governing the 14-day quarantine that the government is imposing on travelers from abroad, except from the Republic of Ireland, oh and France all of a sudden.

Last time I checked, Ireland was still part of the EU, even if not in the Schengen free-travel zone. France definitely is in both. This new British rule 'coincides' with renewed friction between the EU and the UK over the Ireland and Northern-Ireland protocol and how that will be implemented in the final status deal.

It also comes as the EU, which has failed spectacularly on this point, is starting talks with national governments to re-activate Schengen in the wake of the barriers to free travel that were erected in order to combat the pandemic.

The EU-Commission has made clear that it's aiming to lift all internal border closures between EU countries before it will consider lifting measures on its external border, the closure of which has been extended until 15 June, even though how closed this external border is, is up for debate.

The UK is formally outside the EU now, Ireland and France, as noted, are in. Why the French were added at the last minute to the exemption is baffling, probably Macron put heavy pressure on Boris. How the French will square it with expected EU-wide arrangements, is an even bigger question.

The Republic of Ireland's exemption is a much more straightforward fit with the UK government's attempt to preserve the fiction of no border in the Irish Sea, and drive a wedge between Dublin and Brussels. The independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, Sage, has dubbed the Ireland exemption "a serious loophole". It advises that Northern Ireland harmonize its Covid-19 policy with the Republic, rather than with the rest of the UK, sounds familiar? It's the Northern-Ireland protocol all over again.

Brexit is the iceberg that lurks under the surface of government policy and that threatens to sink any sensible approach.