

# Brexit and English heartbreak

***By Ferry Biedermann, freelance journalist working both in the UK and in Europe. He has contributed to the Financial Times, CNBC, the Washington Post, Trouw newspaper in the Netherlands and many others. He is also a former correspondent in the Middle East for the FT and Dutch newspaper de Volkskrant.***

It's a challenge to think of Brexit in modern terms because the whole idea seems like such a throwback to earlier times when the nation-state was a much more dominant centre of power and European countries were constantly at each other's throat.

This is not helped by the fact that many Leave voters were older and that much analysis points up the tribal politics that it has engendered.

Is there a modern take, meaning simply one that uses forward looking ideas, on the phenomenon not only of Brexit but also of other separatist and nationalist, not to say populist, movements in Europe and elsewhere?

It is a pertinent question because if there is not, then it appears that we're at a grave risk of going down the same old, well-trodden road towards escalating competition between nations, conflict and possibly violence.

Framing Brexit as a backlash against globalisation or migration is not giving it a modern explanation, these are reactions and retrograde. There is more to be gained from highlighting the changes that have taken place in the world over the last couple of decades: new international rules and agreements make it easier for individual countries to operate and trade across the globe without being part of a powerful trade bloc and technological change making this more practical.

Maybe so, but why then the emphasis on new trade deals? Also, the international mesh of rules and regulations will mean that much of a promised increase in independence is illusory. Technological innovation offers new opportunities but is still not able to trump the realities of proximity, as the UK is finding out among others from its

inability to find adequate technological solutions to the Irish border issue.

It seems the one truly modern explanation for Brexit lies in the changed situation of the United Kingdom itself and the realisation that it has let go of its Great Power status, not only in the world but now also in Europe and more crucially, at home. More specifically, it is about English heartbreak over first losing an empire and now being in danger of shedding the parts that constitute the UK.

The EU and its predecessors were conceived in the post-WWII era as a way of doing things differently, a modern solution to the age-old problem of competing powers in Europe. Wars in Europe had been extremely costly to the UK, which had been unable to prevent them through its balance of power game.

Taking a new approach, cooperation, was worth a shot, even for a Britain that was still in many ways tethered to its imperial past. Apart from the economic imperatives in the 1960's and 70's, the UK's power brokers must have realised that membership of the EEC offered a way of continuing its great power objective on the continent by different means. Membership facilitated keeping both the Germans and the French in check and embodied as such an old objective in a new guise.

What has changed over the years is the British view of its role in Europe. No longer does the UK see itself as either interested in – or capable of – affecting events on the continent. The supposed outreach to Hungary earlier this month was a faint echo of the kind of games that Whitehall used to play much more adroitly, and certainly more frequently, in the past.

Britain's realisation that it is now just one of many players in Europe, may well be what drives Brexit. It is retrograde in its pique but contains a modern, post-imperial, post-colonial realisation. Its immediate roots are likely to lie in more recent developments that diminished the emphasis on military might: The end of the cold war, the fall of the Wall and German reunification.

Particularly the latter drove home the fact that the balance of power was changing on the continent, along with much genuine and

understandable anguish that found its expression in uncharacteristic anti-German broadsides in the British press that helped fan nationalism.

The end of the Cold War helped set loose the genie of nationalism in many other European countries for a plethora of reasons, among them the lack of a common enemy, the growing inequality that had been kept in check during the competition with the Soviets and increased migration, including from Eastern Europe.

In the UK, and in England in particular, these elements also played a role, yet the end of the Cold War initially offered a way forward, expressed in the early Blair years and Cool Britannia. As well as in the Good Friday agreements and devolution. While the Good Friday agreements were largely forgotten once the violence had abated, devolution remained an important driver of Brexit in that it increased English resentment and nationalism; let's face it, Brexit is an English rather than a British phenomenon.

While devolution, decentralisation and a measure of self-rule fit into the modern political discourse, the centrifugal forces that were set into motion by it, do not. It is one thing to have autonomy, it's an entirely different proposition to return to the fragmented and competing polities that existed before the UK and the EU.

Whatever the results of this round of Brexit, because whatever happens, it is likely to go through a few more rounds in the coming decades, the solution lies in the way the UK feels about itself: Whether it can see itself as a medium-large power that is best-served by cooperating with its immediate neighbours and whether the English can rebuild their ties with the other constituent parts of the UK, particularly Scotland.

Northern-Ireland is a completely different ball game, of course.