

A case for European shock and awe

By Ferry Biedermann, Freelance Journalist and board member at the Dutch Association of Journalists.

Brexit does not make it easy these days to be a European Anglophile, and there are plenty left. The Dutch in particular have always felt a close and largely genial bond with the English, particularly after we conquered the place (for some reason the British keep referring to it as the Glorious Revolution). I'm not suggesting we should do that again but some shock and awe from the European side might be needed to re-inject some reason into the British Brexit debate.

First off, let's set out the case for righteous EU anger: You Brits are an ungrateful bunch. When you were known as the Sick Man of Europe in the 1960's amid lagging economic growth and just out of food rationing, you had to beg three times before being admitted to the European Economic Community club as it then was. France's Charles De Gaulle, admittedly not always easy to get along with, pointed out "the great economic, financial, monetary and social difficulties with which Britain is at grips" and said 'Non'. He had to die for the UK to be let in.

Even then London attempted to cherry pick the agreements that the continental nations had already entered into. There was a lot of gnashing of teeth about fisheries and the Commonwealth, just as there has been in the Brexit debate. Yet, it must have been worth it to the UK to gain unfettered access to a rapidly growing European market and, indeed, to the bloc's expanding trade agreements with third countries, the same agreements that for example facilitate the export of vehicles from the UK to China and now also Japanese investment in the UK.

Quite a journey, from Europe's economic basket case to active member of a vibrant and effective European Union. The ongoing debate about the actual benefits of EU membership to the UK beggars belief. There is no logical way that the UK's economy would have seen the growth it has, without membership of the world's largest trading bloc. Who really believes that the UK has not benefited from access to the common market, from such things as pass porting of services, or even programmes such as Horizon 2020 and

Erasmus? Or for that matter the stability of the Good Friday agreements that were made possible almost solely by the convergence between the Republic and Northern Ireland that joint EU membership brought with it.

And while we're talking stability, let's remember that other seminal European politician, Churchill, who in one of his several calls for a union, spoke of a united Europe. "A Europe whose moral design will win the respect and acknowledgement of all humanity, and whose physical strength will be such that no person will dare to disturb it as it marches peacefully towards the future." Post WWII European stability was as much a function of the EEC and the later Union as economic cooperation. If we started calculating the benefits of peace and the risks that destabilization of the EU might bring with it, we'd be off into the stratosphere. NATO may be there to take care of external security but domestic stability and Western cohesion are very much bound up with the EU. And indeed even back then, Churchill talked about a united Europe, not merely a common market, so by 1972, the UK knew exactly what it was signing up to.

That's not to say that the UK, or any other member, shouldn't have the right to leave the EU. But taking such a fateful step should be predicated on some really deep-seated disagreement, let's say over declaring communism or dictatorship the form of government in the EU, or deciding to become a Russian dominion. Not a hissy fit with xenophobic overtones brought about by admittedly growing economic inequalities, deep-seated distrust of the political class etc. etc. caused overwhelmingly by domestic incompetence rather than the EU.

My advice to the EU is indeed to take the gloves off, no more Mr. nice Juncker or Tusk. Of course we'd like the UK to stay in or have cordial relations with it but not at the price of undermining the rest of the European project. In the final analysis, the EU will do fine without the UK, even without the divorce bill payment, spread out over many years anyway, which the Germans could rustle up in half an hour at a Munich beer fest.

The Netherlands would be one of the countries hardest hit by a hard Brexit but hey, it, like Germany, does run a budget surplus, unlike the UK. And while there's plenty of criticism in the Netherlands and

elsewhere of the EU, no pragmatic Dutch entrepreneur would forsake the massive market it brings with it.

So, it's time to talk punitive measures, tariffs and even sanctions if the UK fails to live up to some of its pre-existing international obligations and if it chooses to willingly undermine the EU, either economically or politically. First off, the Irish backstop equation should be reversed. The EU should make clear that punitive measures will be put in place if the UK causes a hard border to be re-imposed on the Republic and Northern Ireland. That will put the onus for a solution on the UK, where it rightly should lie in view of its decision to mess with the situation. On other subjects, Europe should show equal resolve.

Brexit seems to have been brought on at least in part by an outside view of British weight in the world, often harking back to Empire. But it was Britain that has been repeatedly conquered by European peoples and nations, by the Dutch as late as 1688. The British tried in France for a while but now all they're left with in Europe is a rock at the southern tip of Spain. Europe will be all right without Great Britain but the reverse may no longer be the case. It's a self-inflicted wound that will affect generations of Britons.

As for the Anglophile part, indeed, having said all this, a heartfelt Dutch appeal: please don't leave us at the mercy of those humourless Germans and snooty French!

This blog is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily reflect the views of Centre for Brexit Studies or Birmingham City University.