

Brexit (or the EU) is here to stay in politics

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.

Despite disparate attempts in both Conservative and Labour circles to get 'beyond Brexit', last week's series of local and regional elections across the UK were all about Brexit, in one way or another. Brexit is both a sign of a political realignment that has been a long time coming and has exacerbated it. It will reverberate down the elections cycles, whether politicians and voters like it or not, just like the relationship with the EU plays a role in other European countries. Even outside the EU, Britain will still have to deal with it, as has become clear so far in Jersey, Northern Ireland and soon, possibly in Scotland, where the EU lure might play a role in a future independence referendum.

The Johnson government has set out an unsurprisingly coercive line toward both these British nations where Brexit has caused ructions as it seeks to keep the UK intact, as it has towards the EU. Earlier this week Lord David Frost, the minister in charge of EU-UK trade relations, first met with unionist paramilitaries in the province and then proceeded to warn the EU that the Northern Ireland protocol was unsustainable in the long run. It's the kind of naked power play that has become associated with the Brexiteers and with this Tory government. The question is, why persist with this tactic, especially as the elections are over for now and it's unlikely to intimidate the EU?

Part of the answer is that elections and campaigns are never over, whether Westminster is already eyeing a Scottish referendum or just the next by-election. Another part of the answer is that this is genuinely in the political and behavioural DNA of the current crop of Conservatives. The EU's Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, in his recently published diaries paints Lord Frost as arrogant and somewhat underhand, trying to circumvent the EU negotiating team. This can be excused as par for the course in such negotiations, just like saying boys will be boys can put a gloss of normality over toxic behaviour. But it's clearly a popular line to take towards the EU.

The UK is not unique in Europe in that bashing the EU is, to a varying degree, a vote getter. On the one hand, across Europe the call for leaving the EU and even the Euro, has largely died down in the wake of the shipwreck that most people regard Brexit to be. But on the other, a healthy dose of EU scepticism is expected especially from populist politicians on the left and the right and even from some mainstream figures. The Dutch Prime Minister, Mark Rutte very carefully cultivates his image as Europe's Mr No, in the wake of the departure of the obstructionist Brits. And Austria's leader, Sebastian Kurtz, has even accused the EU of foul play in the uneven distribution of vaccines.

For now, and the foreseeable future, this is merely easy political point scoring at the expense of the EU, not signs that the bloc will fall apart, as is the stated desire of some of Britain's most hardcore Brexiteers. The reason that the EU is an issue in the domestic politics of so many, if not all, European countries, is that it has relevance and power, and is seen as an inextricable part of the European establishment, hence easy to kick against for insurgents. Even in post-Brexit Britain, it's likely that the EU will keep fulfilling that role. The Conservatives in particular will continue to make hay with it. No wonder that Labour figures such as the anyway somewhat Eurosceptic Andy Burnham wants not only to bury Brexit but urges Labour not even to consider rejoining the EU. Yet, Labour has a problem in that its base is shifting to metropolitan areas that mostly voted remain.

The refusal of the EU to lie down and die post-Brexit might yet pose problems for Brexiteers in the long run. They are now boosted by the Johnson government's vaccine success, which has even made some remainers acknowledge the benefits of going it alone. But these have been unique circumstances that are, hopefully, unlikely to be repeated soon. Much will be made of the relative recovery of the British and EU economies, as if this will decide who is the Brexit winner and who's the loser. But that's also a relatively short term perspective. There has been no change in the logic that underpins the EU's single market and that was once shared by no less a Conservative than Margaret Thatcher: it boosts trade and the economy. Putting aside the less welcome effects of enabling hyper-capitalism and weighing the odds in favour of big corporations, such free and frictionless trade is still delivering benefits to most EU populations, a major reason for the bloc's continued survival. At some point the difference, in not only economic development but hopefully also more human-scale and quality of life issues, between the UK and the EU is bound to become very clearly in the latter's favour, as it started to be in the 1970's. At that point Andy Burnham's point of not talking about rejoining will become moot.