

Say Adieu Once More, As the UK Drifts Further Away

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For just a couple of weeks, as winter started taking hold of the continent, it seemed as if miraculously the chill winds of Brexit had somewhat abated. The new and, it was hoped more reasonable or pragmatic, Sunak government appeared to turn a new leaf. Polls were registering Brexit buyers' regret among large swathes of the British electorate as the economy turned sour and the cost of going it alone in a world that increasingly values cooperation became more apparent. But what a mistake it would have been for European policy makers to have been taken in.

The Leave-voting Sunak quickly quashed the trial balloon, possibly launched by his Chancellor of the Exchequer, to more closely integrate with European trade, perhaps even partially re-joining the Single Market. Smoother trade was seen as desirable, but not at the price of making the sort of compromises that almost any deal with a large trading bloc would entail. On that other perennial sticking point, the Northern Ireland protocol, the tone has shifted but not much else. The European Commission was in fact recently given powers to slap sanctions on the UK if the British government unilaterally scraps the arrangement. And despite a lot of talk of how much better talks are going, there are also reports that neither side thinks a solution is imminent.

Then there's the migration issue, the fetid, gaseous cloud of underbelly sewage keeping the whole Brexit undertaking afloat. Not content with having stopped the inflow of Polish and Estonian baristas and plumbers, the consecutive Tory administrations have kept busy trying to fly refugees to Rwanda and blocking Albanians from crossing the Channel. The one achievement of the improvement in the *ton qui fait la musique* under Sunak is an agreement with France to try reduce the number of small boats crossings, for which the UK will pay. It was signed by Suella Braverman, the re-appointed Home Secretary, anti-migration crusader and Brexiteer extraordinaire. She's reported to be considering ever more extreme means of deterring migrants, who cannot feel particularly welcome anyway, given what they have to endure at processing centres such as Manston in Kent, where they had to sleep in the open. Not that this is a particularly British failing. The Netherlands recently saw similar scenes under a comparably right-wing government at its processing centre in Ter Apel, symbolically located at the very edge of the country, right on the German border.

For good measure, Sunak doubled down on the anti-migration theme for that most august but rather anti-Brexit British institution, the Confederation of British Industry. If any European leader had thought that this might offer an opportunity for the new British government to set out a way to repair trade and business ties, they were quickly disabused. Sunak made clear that fighting illegal immigration was his "priority" and also sounded cool on legal immigration to tackle shortages in the labour market, as the CBI had advocated. Now, there are certainly cases to be made for not importing cheap labour or outsourcing work to low-wage countries but Sunak had no alternative plan to deal with the current issues facing the British economy, as the CBI also pointed out. In the end, the UK is still a European country, also in the sense that it shares Europe's trend of having an ageing population, as the recent census results once more confirmed. In the end, something will have to give.

Anti-migration rhetoric is by now such a part of the Tory DNA that neither Sunak's nor Braverman's stance are likely to raise any eyebrows. That cannot be said of the presumptive PM in waiting, Labour leader Keir Starmer. The transformation of this once leading Remainer to the poodle of formerly Red Wall Leave voters is now almost complete. Not only has he taken any talk of re-joining the EU firmly off the table, he has now voiced agreement with the kind of short-sighted and

simplistic formulations against which he once fulminated. He says he understand Leave voters' desire for more control over their lives etc. etc. as if that has anything to do with being part of the EU, which, incidentally, offers far superior protections of people's rights, work, environment etc. than either a Tory or Labour UK Government is ever likely to provide. Sir Keir's strategy may be sound in an abjectly opportunistic electoral way, although we'll never know because no Labour leader has so far had the inclination or the guts to be roundly pro-European.

This is another lesson that the EU's leaders can take away from the post-Truss purgatory that is British politics. For at least a generation, if not longer, no major UK party will make a significant move towards the bloc. Yes, we're still neighbours, although there's increasingly a feeling that Great Britain is a raft that has cast off its moorings and is now slowly and precariously bobbling away, carried along by an undertow of whirling nationalism. The Labour leader made this very clear by trying to outdo Sunak on migration in front of the CBI, pledging to wean British business off migration. It's the language of exceptionalism and it even demonises a phenomenon with which the British people and all Europeans have lived forever. Starmer then nailed the re-join coffin shut by going against most analyses at the moment and denying that re-joining would help the economy.

Europe will have to brace itself and not be nostalgic for a Britain that was part of the EU, however obstructive it was while in there. It is clear that the whole British electoral landscape has shifted to the right, which has also happened in some other European countries. The difference is that most right-wing parties that have a chance at power in the EU now by and large acknowledge the benefits for their populations of staying in. In the UK even the left has now decided to acquiesce in the lie that going it alone will make people better off.