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Our European neighbours now look at post-Brexit Britain and say simply: nein, danke

Jonathan Freedland, *The Guardian*, Fri 13 Jan 2023

We're good Europeans at last. Nearly seven years after we voted to leave, Britons are finally doing their bit for the European Union. Diligently and with dogged devotion to duty, we are strengthening the ties that bind the 27 remaining nations of the EU – though not quite in the way anyone would have wanted.

Take a look at the Europe-wide survey, published yesterday, which showed that support for leaving the EU has tanked everywhere since 2016. In every EU member state where data was available, from Finland to the Netherlands, Portugal to Hungary, pro-leave sentiment has fallen through the floor. Even Europe's most hardcore anti-EU parties have abandoned the goal of actually leaving the EU – no more talk of Frexit or Italexit – aiming instead merely to reform the union from within.

Hmmm, I wonder what could possibly explain such an unmistakable shift in European opinion. Some might like to think it's the war in Ukraine or the Covid pandemic, both of which served as reminders of the value of international solidarity. But the explanation that leaps out is the obvious one. Europeans have taken one look at Britain since the Brexit referendum and thought: *Nein, danke*.

They see our political dysfunction, with five prime ministers in six years. They see the way Brexit divided the nation down the middle, injecting acrimony and toxicity into our national life. They see our economic malaise, with Britain lagging behind, facing the same pressures of post-Covid recovery and inflation as our neighbours but suffering more, with a 5.2% shrinkage in GDP and a 13.7% fall in investment in the last quarter of 2021, compared with the projected numbers had we not left the EU – all attributable specifically to Brexit, rather than, say, the pandemic.

The Office for Budget Responsibility stated it baldly enough in November: "Brexit has had a significant adverse impact on UK trade," it said, noting a decline in "trade intensity" of 15%. Europeans see all that and think, there but for the grace of God. This is our great contribution to the European project: to act as a cautionary tale.

"Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role," was the much-quoted verdict of the postwar US secretary of state Dean Acheson. Well, we've found a role now. We are the salutary lesson in what not to do. If ever the nations of Europe feel frustrated by the EU, they need only glance across the Channel – and pause.

Recall that a central, repeated argument of the Brexiters was the cutting of red tape. More than a decade ago, Nigel Farage was raging against David Cameron having the gall to speak about deregulation to help entrepreneurs: "How can he talk about cutting red tape but not the EU regs which cause it?"

According to Farage, it was being in the EU that was causing British businesses to be snarled up in bureaucracy. And yet, now that we're out, what is the loudest, most plaintive complaint you hear from British traders hoping to sell their goods into their nearest markets, across the Channel? It's the endless hours spent dealing with red tape – customs forms, delays, double-charged VAT imposed on customers at the other end – caused not by being in the EU, as Farage insisted, but by being outside it.

Small wonder that 57% of Britons now say that Brexit has created more problems than it has solved, with a meagre 10% reckoning the reverse is true, according to a survey by Best for Britain. Even among Conservative voters, more take the dim view of Brexit than the sunny one.

The evidence of Brexit as a problem-creator is all around. (...) But nowhere is the gap between Brexit rhetoric and reality clearer than in Northern Ireland. The leavers breezily waved aside concerns over what appeared to the reality-based community as an insuperable problem: given that there would always have to be a border between the EU and a UK that had chosen to leave the customs union, where would such a border lie? It couldn't be

between Northern Ireland and the republic without jeopardising the Good Friday agreement. It couldn't be down the Irish Sea without angering unionists, who want there to be no distinction between Northern Ireland and Great Britain. So where? (...)

Legislation is coming that will see the construction of border posts at Northern Irish ports: as one commentator puts it, "the UK is building and operating an international trade border within its own country", a border that didn't used to be there. Yet another problem that Brexit created rather than solved.

All of this is in plain sight. Which is why the London mayor, Sadiq Khan, is surely right to call, as he did this week, for the Westminster omertà on Brexit to be lifted and for us to start talking about it openly and honestly.

Labour's official position is that the subject is closed, that there cannot even be Khan's "pragmatic debate" about the merits of rejoining the single market and customs union. The political logic is simple enough: leave voters resent being told they were wrong, and Labour should do nothing that might fracture its electoral coalition. But a counter-logic is growing stronger every day. When there is a force in our national life causing clear and present economic and political harm, a party of opposition – let alone government – has to talk about it. Our neighbours can see it plainly enough. They have observed the damage Brexit is doing and have drawn the obvious conclusion. It's about time we did the same.

Jonathan Freedland is a Guardian columnist

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