

# 'Can't live with EU – can't live without EU'

Even now, more than eight years after the UK voted to leave the European Union, the obstinate refusal by the Remainer Establishment to acknowledge the result has itself become worthy of study, according to Historian Robert Tombs in an article for *Briefings for Britain*.

*“Such stubborn attachment to a faded utopia is not something I think people expected. I certainly didn't...Future historians will surely think the persistence of the Remain mindset worthy of study.”*

Yet so determined are they to reset relations with an organisation already past its sell-by-date that any attempt to talk them out of it is quite futile.

Dodgy dossiers and baseless propaganda are the tools by which Rejoiners continue to talk Brexit down – including export data analysis and econometric growth models which are so spurious and inconsistent as to render them largely meaningless.

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# Brexit is not yet done

Written by Robert Tombs

There is a stubborn attachment to the faded utopia of the EU among those who resented Brexit. If Keir Starmer has any sense, his 'reset' will be confined to photo-ops and smiles.

As we enter a New Year full of uncertainties, there is one thing of which we can be sure: Brexit is not done. Who would have thought that as the ninth anniversary of the 2016 referendum approaches, we should have a government talking about a 'reset' of relations with an ever more troubled European Union, and pro-EU lobbyists calling for politicians to show 'courage' and start talking about formal accession.

Of course, 'courage' is unlikely, but what is all too likely is surreptitious shuffling towards alignment with the EU, despite its political and economic foundations visibly cracking.

Such stubborn attachment to a faded utopia is not something I think people expected. I certainly didn't. Indeed, I imprudently predicted that life outside the EU would so quickly be taken for granted that it would be hard to find anyone admitting to having voted 'Remain'. Boris Johnson seemed to think the same, as in 2020 he asked the little group I belong to called 'Briefings for Brexit' to change its name because Brexit had been done.

Future historians will surely think the persistence of the Remain mindset worthy of study. In 2016, a concerted 'Project Fear' convinced many that even to vote to leave would cause immediate economic disaster – financial crisis, mass unemployment, and emergency tax increases.

Most Remain voters said at the time that this was the major

reason for their decision. Yet despite fears proving false (as leading economists had predicted), the number of people seemingly regretting Brexit has increased.

The obvious reason is the endless resuscitation of Project Fear. The subtler version is to say that although there has been no disaster yet, one day there will be. The cruder version is to say that there has already been a disaster because everything bad is due to Brexit – leaving out such minor matters as war, pandemic, and destructive government policies both here and in the EU.

Some of these dodgy dossiers have been crude indeed, to the point of being comical. A recent report by Aston University – widely endorsed by the Rejoinder media – listed untold damage to British exports. They had apparently not noticed that one of the export trades they said had collapsed was frozen camel meat, which the UK has only exported once in some freak business deal. Export items such as coconuts and bamboo had simply been reclassified as re-exports.

Aston also failed to notice that some of what they identified as cessation of exports was simply due to changes in official HS tariff codes, not to any actual change in trade flows. When I asked the BBC why they had reported this without question, they replied that it was not their job to check facts. So much for BBC Verify – at least for anti-Brexit myths.

The most repeated of these myths concerns '4 percent': the magical figure of what the British economy is supposed to have lost, or is going to lose, or which credulous people seem to think it is continually losing every year. The – 4 percent was merely the average of 13 econometric models calculated by 10 different organisations between 2016 and 2019.

Three organisations produced two results using different models and/or different productivity assumptions. Econometrics

is not an exact science. The results varied by 456%, mainly due to an outlier result from the World Bank. Even the organisations that produced two predictions had results varying by up to 156% simply by using different econometric models.

Half of the 13 studies doubled their estimates of the future impact of Brexit by assuming that declines in trade have large impacts on productivity. We can find little sign of such a relationship for advanced economies (unlike emerging economies). Without this assumption the forecast negative impact of Brexit was only 2%. The decision to include or exclude this important assumption cannot both be correct, but the OBR make no attempt to decide which is correct and merely take an average over the contrasting studies.

All of the calculations were made years before the UK-EU trade agreement was finalised. For the OBR to still be using this average, and for the media to treat it as if it were a single, well-founded, calculation is ludicrous.

The OBR also claimed that the lower productivity would be caused by low investment and 15% lower trade. Neither of which has happened. There was lower investment while Theresa May was dithering about leaving the EU without a trade agreement, and trade was lower during Covid, but both were reversed in 2023 and 2024. The present Labour government may discourage additional investment in the UK but this can't be blamed on Brexit.

Why is this stream of propaganda so persistent? One cannot rule out a combination of prejudice and ignorance— some of the data are elusive and the theories complex, so many commentators don't ask questions, but happily believe two impossible things before breakfast. One also cannot rule out self-interest and money: some Remainer lobbies and media outlets receive generous funds from pro-EU sources, or even from the EU itself.

(In case any reader is wondering, Briefings for Britain are unpaid volunteers and running costs are met by public donations.) So the loudest voices over the last eight years first aimed to resist Leave, and then to discredit it.

It is not surprising that uncertain and worried voters have let themselves be persuaded that Brexit was a bad idea – few prominent Tory politicians argued the positive case. But there is another reason than economic propaganda for the persistence of Remain. An academic study by Adam Fagan and Stijn van Kessel shows that leading Remainers were very little concerned with making a positive case for EU membership. They were anti-Brexit without being pro-EU. This contradictory position, I think, is the key to understanding Rejoin.

For a variety of reasons, a section of the political class and its followers do not want Brexit to be successful on any terms. Johnson, Farage, and now Badenoch are to be defeated, and the EU is the weapon. Some of this is party tactics. Labour, the SNP and the Lib Dems realize they can discredit the Tories and Reform by discrediting and reversing Brexit.

Only Kemi Badenoch during the last government was both making an energetic attempt to defend Brexit and realize its benefits. The apathy of her colleagues is a major reason for their losing the election: why vote for a party that seems ashamed of its biggest achievement and allows its opponents to rubbish it?

At a deeper level, there are cultural and even psychological motives at work. Anti-Brexitism has become part of the 'woke' agenda. In the same way that ample evidence that Britain is not a racist country is irrelevant to 'anti-racists', rational evidence about the potentialities of Brexit, the failings of the EU, and the disadvantages and costs of rejoining or 'resetting' is irrelevant to hard-core anti-Brexiteers.

For most voters, however, the economic facts about Brexit are

very relevant. Fortunately, they are simple. There has been no decline in trade overall, and if goods exports to the EU have languished, it is partly because the EU is a stagnant market. Our post-Brexit economic growth performance has been as good as or better than the EU's. Economic weaknesses are due not to Brexit, but to global factors, most obviously Covid and the Ukraine war, and to successive British governments' energy and tax policies.

Some small traders indeed suffer from Brexit-related bureaucratic barriers, but it must be remembered that their former ability to sell home-made jam or artisan cheese unhindered to the Single Market was being paid for by a disproportionate budgetary contribution by the British taxpayer. That bill would now be over £20 billion a year, making formal accession to the EU financially and politically unthinkable.

Meanwhile, the EU has adopted since 2016 a multitude of restrictive laws, including on finance, artificial intelligence and gene editing, which are damaging its future prospects (as many EU enthusiasts admit) and will damage us too if we align with them.

We need very little from the EU, other than a less obstructive attitude to Northern Ireland. Yet the EU is behaving with remarkable obstreperousness, leaking demands on fishing rights and movement of people (involving taxpayer subsidy to foreign students) guaranteed to embarrass Starmer and make him look weak.

Perhaps the EU is in such a mess that they are still worried that the whole system might unravel if they don't keep cracking the whip over the Brexit rebellion. Perhaps they want to rub Britain's nose in it and think Starmer is a pushover. If he has any sense, his 'reset' will be confined to photo-ops and smiles.

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