

FRIENDS LET DOWN BY BREXIT

Radio 4 recently asked people from Germany, Egypt, Nigeria, Canada and India how they saw the UK. None of them could understand why the it would want to leave the European Union. The media reports widespread regret across Europe combined with bafflement and irritation but also competition to replace British businesses. Liberator asked friends across Europe how they see Britain and Brexit

Søs Haugaard is a member of the national board and vice-chair of the Copenhagen section of Radikale Venstre, the Danish social liberal party, which is a member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE).

In May 2016, 10 former foreign ministers of Denmark wrote a joint letter to the editor of *The Times* to implore Britain to stay in the EU, referring to how the two countries had “joined the European Community together in 1973”. They went on to make an emotional appeal to the memory of “the deep gratitude [with which Danes remember] the British people’s heroic fight for freedom and democracy in Europe during the Second World War”, and how British membership had therefore been seen as a “guarantee that the European Community would continue to develop to ensure peace and democracy.”

This is emblematic of the Danish perception of Anglo-Danish relations, which is a narrative of gratitude and kinship. I think that Danes will miss Britain in the EU and they fear that a hitherto close connection between the two nations will grow more distant. Having said that, I believe there is general agreement that Denmark needs to protect its own interests as a continued member of the EU, even if this may be at the expense of British interests in the current situation.

The right-wing nationalist Dansk Folkeparti (The Danish People’s Party) briefly latched onto the Brexit agenda suggesting that it was time to reconsider Danish membership. This hope was short-lived; even to nationalists and Eurosceptics it must seem unrealistic to imagine that Denmark would follow Britain’s example and leave.

And why is that? Historically, we have always been ambivalent about the EU. A cross-party organisation, Folkebevægelsen mod EU (The People’s Movement against the EU), founded in 1972 to campaign against Denmark joining the EEC, as it was then, is still active and has one member in the European Parliament.

Originally, resistance to the EEC was part of a left-wing agenda seeing the community as an expression of capitalist protectionism and the free movement of people as contrary to workers’ interests. Largely, Folkebevægelsen is the remnants of this tendency. Add to this the new populist right with its anti-immigration

agenda and general resistance to internationalism, and you have a fairly substantial resistance to or at least scepticism about Danish membership of the EU.

On that background, you would think that there was every risk that Denmark would leave, but I do not think so. Paradoxically, this could have something to do with frequent referendums leading to the famous Danish ‘opt-outs’, which mean, among other things, that Denmark is not in the euro, cannot participate in EU military operations and is exempt from supranational legal policy. I would suggest that the fact that Denmark has continually discussed, negotiated and modified its relationship with the EU has in a backward sort of way ensured our continued membership, and I find it unlikely that there will be serious calls for an actual in/out referendum.

Travelling back from a political meeting with a fellow Radikal, I asked her what she thought of Brexit (everyone thinks it is a disaster—but beyond that).

She said: “It is as if Britain cannot find the right balance when it comes to her place in the world. If only the British could find a happy medium between ruling a worldwide empire and closing in on themselves completely, everyone would be much happier. We shall miss their contribution in what is left of the EU.”

Kate Vanovitch is a British interpreter and translator who has lived in Berlin since the early 1980s. She has worked at international meetings with many political and business leaders. She is now applying for German citizenship.

Shopkeepers, taxi drivers, neighbours, clients, friends in Berlin frequently ask what is going on in the UK. Only yesterday a Kurdish taxi driver asked me if anyone had any good reasons for voting Brexit. They are well informed and follow the saga with concerned empathy. My grocer regularly expresses dismay at the obvious confusion of a nation that does not seem to know what it wants. This is a common reaction. People are dismayed that Britain seems to be falling out of the EU like a hapless lemming. They are shocked by the political shambles, surprised by parliamentary absurdities, sorry for the people who are or will be suffering the effects, aware that a huge number of people do not want it.

Me and people like me living and working in other EU countries, we are deeply hurt and angry. Many of us.

Horrified by ignorance about the EU right up to party leadership level, by the lies and spin in the media, the slap in the face for small businesses, the denial of realities, the undemocratic process (until the eleventh-hour parliamentary brinkmanship).

We feel abandoned. Back 'home' there is an oblivious disregard for our lives. Some of us were not even allowed to vote in the referendum, having worked abroad for too many years. The people back 'home' who did vote were incomprehensibly handed executive power by a cynical government to decide on our lives – and on Ireland and on quite a few other things beyond their ken. They did so by a slim majority, squeezed out by a cocktail of misinformation, shameless lies and provenly illicit campaigning procedures. The 'will of the people' is a modern-day trope of the emperor's new clothes, and our leaders are too cowardly to call it out.

The UK is driving away its own. Brits all over the EU are taking other passports. Highly qualified young people are choosing to resettle on the continent because they are so disgusted about the embarrassingly blinkered, mendacious world of Little Englandism.

More than 100,000 Brits are registered as living in Germany. Berlin is the Land with the most (18,000+), having now overtaken North Rhine-Westphalia. While the UK remains in the EU dual citizenship is still possible. The number of Brits applying for German citizenship has grown dramatically since before the referendum, from 622 in 2015 to 7,493 in 2017. I have started the process. When I took my integration test recently, two-thirds of the other candidates in the room were Brits.

The German Foreign Office, British Embassy and Foreigners Registration Office in Berlin have worked together to communicate with British residents. At public meetings in Berlin and Leipzig, German speakers reassured Brits they were welcome in Germany and said they had wanted to bring a list of definite rights (settlement, onward travel, social insurance etc.) but the prospect of 'no deal' meant these commitments could not yet be made as much of it is reciprocal, and nothing is certain without knowing whether the UK will honour the rights of EU citizens.

POLITICS AND BREXIT

Generally, federal politicians have not weighed in on the Brexit decision, as that is clearly a British affair, but have expressed regret at losing the UK. Just 7% of German exports go to the UK.

The Süddeutsche Zeitung has this headline: "Apart from the incompetence and lack of responsibility of the governing Tories, it is the Labour Party, that embodies the breakdown of political culture in Britain."

The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD - our Ukipers) have just decided not to press for Dexit for now after all (their leader said: "Isn't that utopian? Shouldn't we be realistic?") but to demand EU reform. (They do want to abolish the European Parliament though and would like the Deutsche Mark back.)

The Freie Demokraten Partei (FDP) - the Liberal Democrats' partners in Germany and member of (ALDE) is not usually quoted in national news on the

topic of Brexit, other themes being more important for them at headline level, their website makes Brexit a key theme and features a long article including: "We Free Democrats would like to keep Britain as a strong partner for the EU, but not come what may."

"'Cherry-picking' or relinquishing fundamental principles of the Single Market is out of the question."

"Even after Brexit, the process of European union must continue".

A recent article begins: "We Free Democrats regret the Brexit decision taken by British citizens, but we want to respond to the situation pragmatically. We think the agreement put forward goes in the right direction, because the EU has centred on the interests of people. It is vital that the rights of the EU citizens living on the British Isles are ensured."

The article then goes on to tell the government what to plan for, but what is the federal government actually doing?

Sonja Rentz is an Austrian Young Federalist studying at Strasbourg University and Trinity College, Dublin.

In general, the Austrian people regret the UK's decision to leave the EU and are therefore still open to welcoming the British back. After the ongoing debate for years though, people in Austria are keen on knowing what the British want and ask them for taking a clear decision. May's determination and insistence are however in this context beyond comprehension for many, it is seen as an obstacle for admitting mistakes that might have been made and for reversing in hindsight undesired policies.

Austrian politicians are meanwhile making efforts to reassure certain rights for UK citizens living in Austria. Whereas it has been made clear that the British will lose their official residence authorisation if the UK leaves with no deal, the government is elaborating a special regulation that enables British people to stay and work in Austria, if they have been doing so before the leaving date.

Even though dual citizenship is admitted by Austria solely in special cases, the minister for foreign affairs, Karin Kneissl, not only is considering a new exception for British-Austrian dual citizenship, she also announced an accelerated procedure for UK citizens.

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