

Brexit

Rudolf G. Adam
English text revised by Gill Mertens

Brexit

Causes and Consequences

 Springer

Rudolf G. Adam
Prien, Chiemsee, Germany

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Preface

This book is based on my book *Brexit: Eine Bilanz*, which was published in German by Springer Verlag in March 2019. This version has been extensively revised with an English-speaking readership in mind. Several passages have been rewritten, and the text has been updated to take account of recent developments up to 15 April 2019. Some last touches were added to the proofs to take into account Theresa May's resignation and the appointment of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister. Further developments, however, will have to be covered by another book.

I confess that if I had had a vote, I would have voted Remain in 2016. Therefore, I am not writing *sine ira et studio*—without fear or favour. However, I am not blind to the weaknesses of the Remain campaign or of the European Union. I have tried to give a balanced and meticulous account of events. I have sought to explain why events happened and to point out missed opportunities and fatal decisions. I have not refrained from passing judgment, but I have tried to steer clear of bias. As history keeps unfolding, some of these accounts and some of the judgments will have to be revised in the light of events and better evidence. Not all readers will agree with my judgments. My life experience has led me to believe that it is better to provoke counterarguments than to gloss over controversial views. Opposing arguments make for good debate and stronger outcomes. The book has been written as a contribution to the on-going debate, seeking to bring some intellectual substance to a discourse far too often dominated by emotions, by fear and hope, by presumption and by wishful thinking.

This book is based on extensive research, personal interviews and numerous contacts dating back to my time in Oxford, my career in the German Diplomatic Service and from my years at the German Embassy in London.

It consists of four parts: The first three contain an analysis of the historical background and a narrative of events. The fourth is devoted to an analysis of possible consequences, and the book concludes with a brief outlook.

My thanks are due first of all to Gill Mertens, whose invaluable help has given guidance and direction to the English version. I wish to thank Isabella Hanser and Johannes Glaeser of Springer Verlag who supported this book from the editorial perspective. I owe deep gratitude to all those who helped me form a clearer impression of what was going on: Anand Menon, Robert Cooper, Charles Grant, Robin Niblett, Henry Newman, Vernon Bogdanor, Lord Green of Hurstpierpoint, Thomas Kielinger, Oliver Schramm, Mark Boleat, Tim Shipman, Robert Bischof, Denis MacShane, Clemens Fuest, Holger Schmieding, Thomas Matussek and many, many others.

The selection of facts, quotes and assessments remain my sole responsibility.

Quotes from the Internet are followed by the date on which the page was last accessed.

I call people who support *Leave Brexiteers*. It rhymes with engineer, mountaineer, pioneer, privateer and buccaneer, and it sounds much more impressive than *Brexiter*, even though the Oxford English Dictionary lists both neologisms.

Prien, Germany
April 2019

Rudolf G. Adam

Summary in Seven Theses

1. **Brexit is a process.** Its roots go back decades, and it will reverberate for decades to come. Uncertainty about the role the United Kingdom will play after Brexit—if it ever happens—indicates a chaotic separation process. It was one of May's worst strategic mistakes to initiate divorce proceedings before establishing firm—preferably bipartisan—support for the future arrangement with the EU and to agree to the EU's negotiating tactic in sorting out the divorce settlement before discussing the future relationship. It was clear—and has been confirmed by the chaotic Parliamentary proceedings surrounding her deal—that the short-term divorce agreement would have to be informed by the framework for long-term cooperation.

David Cameron failed on three accounts: He wanted to keep his country in the EU and has catapulted it out. He wanted to reconcile his party and escalated the divisions to the brink of an open split. He wanted to return calm and predictability to his country and to exorcise the EU phantom once and for all, and he has plunged it into unprecedented discord, chaos and uncertainty. He has revived and fuelled all the old divisions about the EU.

2. **Brexit is not only a problem of economics and finances.** It has deep psychological and emotional undercurrents. It is essentially a question of English nationalism. Scotland and Northern Ireland have voted Remain; the Tories (and UKIP) are successful primarily in English constituencies. Brexit has thrown up some fundamental constitutional problems in the UK: Where does sovereignty reside? What is the right balance between the executive powers of government and the legislative powers of Parliament? How do four nations live peacefully under the common roof of one monarchy? What has precedence: Common law or European law? Regarding

Brexit only as a problem about GDP, incomes, statistics or productivity ignores the underlying issues. Brexit is a long-term nemesis—not just for the United Kingdom but also for the structure of the European Union. The undercurrents will alter the shape, structure and procedures of today's EU, and the Eurozone¹ will ultimately become the real future of the EU.

3. **Referenda are not necessarily democratic.** They presuppose an electorate with a clear and informed view of all the issues. But who these people are is a more complex problem than first appears. Is what 17 million people voted for truly representative of the will of the 46 million who were enfranchised, let alone of the 65 million that actually made up the population of the United Kingdom? In most democracies, decisions that touch on fundamental questions of national identity require enhanced majorities. For a result of a referendum to be accepted as the true expression of the people, there should be minimal thresholds in terms of turnout and majority. These thresholds should be clearly defined in advance. If democracy implies a vivid interplay between government and opposition and if it means that minorities should keep the chance of becoming majorities and that all political decisions should be open for revision, then a referendum is not democratic: it silences the minority, it fixes a momentary majority in stone, and yet it is supposed to be final and unquestionable: *Plebs locuta—causa finita?* If a referendum directly expresses the will of the people as the ultimate sovereign, then this sovereign should retain the option to change its will and express itself again in another referendum. Each referendum is valid only until superseded by a subsequent one.
4. **The EU has lost the myth of irresistibility and irreversibility.** It is no longer the manifest destiny of Europe. The EU cannot claim to speak for Europe if four important European countries say an unmistakable no to EU membership (Norway, Switzerland, Iceland and the United Kingdom). The *Méthode Monnet* is outdated. The EU is not losing a member of the club, but a close relative. The loss of the United Kingdom will seriously affect the standing and the influence of the EU across the world.
5. **Security in Europe will remain rudimentary without the United Kingdom.** The EU will lose 20% of its military capabilities. The role of NATO will be upgraded. Ambitions to equip the EU with military capabilities will have to be trimmed. The United Kingdom has no intention of reducing its role in the intergovernmental areas of the EU. It should be

¹I prefer to capitalise the Eurozone. In the end, the Eurozone is bound to overshadow the EU and take its place at the core of European integration.

given extensive rights of participation and contribution in the fields of CFSP, police and internal security and intelligence.

6. **EU Member States will be affected in different ways.** In terms of trade, Ireland, the Netherlands, Germany and France will feel the effects most strongly. Other countries—particularly those in the East—have little trade but large expatriate communities. Ireland will suffer effects not only in its trade. The border regime in the north could reignite violence and political terror. The general rule is the following: the harder Brexit, the harder the border on the island of Ireland.
7. **Brexit will not be decided until there is broad consensus** about what should replace EU membership. Leaving something behind presupposes a guiding idea about the future. Casting off from moorings and setting sail makes no sense unless the captain and crew have a common idea about the destination. May's fundamental omission consisted in setting the process of separation in motion without having forged a broad understanding about the nature of future arrangements. Purely procedural steps will not make up for the fundamental lack of consensus. Neither a snap election nor a second referendum will per se facilitate an endurable solution. What is needed is time for sober, objective and informed reflection and a thorough analysis of realistic alternatives. The strict sequencing of negotiations (no negotiations about future relations without a valid Withdrawal Treaty) gave the EU a strong tactical advantage. But it was also responsible for the deadlock that emerged after November 2018. The renewed extension of the deadline granted on 10 April 2019 narrows down the likely options for a final Brexit outcome. The backstop appears to be dead. A Norway model giving access to the Single Market would make no sense for a country like Britain. That leaves effectively three options: a free trade agreement, a customs union or a revocation of the Article 50 declaration. A new impulse for stalled Brexit negotiations will most likely come by reaching some basic understanding about a future relationship with the EU. If that includes the option of the United Kingdom staying within the EU, Brussels should begin to prepare an offer that could nudge public opinion in the United Kingdom towards such an outcome.

Contents

| | | |
|----------|--|-----|
| 1 | With Europe, But Not of Europe | 1 |
| 1.1 | Churchill's 1946 Speech in Zurich and the ECSC (1950) | 1 |
| 1.2 | Messina and Rome (1955/1957) | 9 |
| 1.3 | Paris (1961–1969) | 10 |
| 1.4 | Brussels (1973) | 19 |
| 1.5 | The First Referendum (1975) | 20 |
| 1.6 | Bruges (1988) | 27 |
| 1.7 | Black Wednesday and EU Romance Under Major and Blair (1992–2005) | 30 |
| 1.8 | Shifting Public Opinion in the United Kingdom from 2010 | 37 |
| | References | 44 |
| | | |
| 2 | Cameron Fighting the EU and His Own Party: Preparing for Brexit | 47 |
| 2.1 | David Cameron Before 2010 | 47 |
| 2.2 | Prime Minister Cameron (2010) | 49 |
| 2.3 | The Bloomberg Speech (2013) | 53 |
| 2.4 | Referendum in Scotland, War in Ukraine, Cameron Juggles (2014) | 56 |
| 2.5 | Triumph in Elections: Defeat in Referendum (2015) | 66 |
| 2.6 | Charting the Course Ahead (2015) | 70 |
| 2.7 | Renegotiations (2016) | 76 |
| 2.8 | Remain: Britain Stronger in Europe (2016) | 86 |
| 2.9 | Leave: Vote Leave, Leave.EU and Grassroots Out (2016) | 93 |
| 2.10 | The European Union | 100 |

| | | |
|----------|--|------------|
| 2.11 | External Events (2016) | 103 |
| 2.12 | Demons Unleashed (2016) | 106 |
| | References | 119 |
| 3 | Brexit Means Brexit: Squaring the Circle | 125 |
| 3.1 | Finding the Entrance to Exit (2016) | 125 |
| 3.2 | Looking for the Bespoke Agreement | 130 |
| 3.2.1 | The Norway Model | 130 |
| 3.2.2 | The Switzerland Model | 131 |
| 3.2.3 | The Turkey Model | 131 |
| 3.2.4 | The Canada Model | 132 |
| 3.2.5 | The WTO Model | 132 |
| 3.3 | Lancaster House: May Declares Her Position (2017) | 134 |
| 3.4 | Departure Without Return? (2017) | 141 |
| 3.5 | Early Elections 8 June 2017: May Loses Time and Power | 144 |
| 3.6 | May Speaks in Florence, Johnson Fires Across Her Bows (2017) | 147 |
| 3.7 | Separation Treaty and European Union Withdrawal Bill (2017) | 150 |
| 3.8 | Brexit Takes Shape (2018) | 155 |
| 3.8.1 | In Quest of a New Course | 155 |
| 3.8.2 | The Chequers White Paper of July 2018 | 158 |
| 3.8.3 | Two Men Overboard: But No Mutiny | 161 |
| 3.8.4 | Salzburg and Birmingham: Land in sight or Fata Morgana? | 164 |
| 3.8.5 | Will the Pilot Be Dropped or Pushed Overboard? | 169 |
| 3.9 | A Never-Ending Story | 176 |
| 3.9.1 | May's Spectacular Defeat | 176 |
| 3.9.2 | Parliament's No, No, No Is Not an Answer | 179 |
| 3.9.3 | A House Divided Against Itself Cannot Stand | 187 |
| | References | 189 |
| 4 | Brexit and No End | 195 |
| 4.1 | A Preliminary Assessment | 195 |
| 4.1.1 | A Lack of Understanding | 195 |
| 4.1.2 | The Historical Background | 199 |
| 4.1.3 | Some Sociology of Brexit | 201 |
| 4.1.4 | The Loss of Englishness | 204 |
| 4.1.5 | Changes in Political Life | 204 |

| | | |
|----------|--|------------|
| 4.1.6 | The Psychological Factor | 206 |
| 4.2 | The United Kingdom | 208 |
| 4.2.1 | Domestic Consequences | 209 |
| 4.2.2 | The Issues | 221 |
| 4.2.3 | Sovereignty | 221 |
| 4.2.4 | Economy: Industry, Agriculture, and Foreign Trade | 226 |
| 4.2.5 | Migration | 238 |
| 4.2.6 | Budgets | 244 |
| 4.2.7 | Global Alternatives to the Single Market? | 247 |
| 4.3 | Republic of Ireland | 252 |
| 4.4 | Germany | 257 |
| 4.5 | The EU: Loss of a Family Member | 261 |
| 4.5.1 | Ever Closer Union of People? | 264 |
| 4.5.2 | The European Court of Justice | 267 |
| 4.5.3 | Majority Voting | 270 |
| 4.5.4 | Complacency? | 271 |
| 4.5.5 | EU Member States Will Be Affected Differently | 272 |
| 4.5.6 | Security | 275 |
| 4.5.7 | Treaties | 276 |
| 4.5.8 | The EU Has to Redefine Itself | 277 |
| | References | 279 |
| | | |
| 5 | A Crystal Ball? | 283 |
| 5.1 | Beyond the Constitutional Crisis and the Brexit Conundrum | 289 |
| 5.2 | A Historical Perspective | 292 |
| | References | 300 |

About the Author

Rudolf G. Adam has spent almost 10 years of his life in the United Kingdom. He first crossed the Channel as a schoolboy to help with the harvest on a farm in Hampshire. He then studied Modern History at Brasenose College in Oxford. He took his B.A. in 1971 and his D.Phil. in 1974. He was a Robert Birley scholar and a Rhodes scholar. In 1976, he joined the German Foreign Service. His postings included Singapore and Beijing. He then worked as a speechwriter for Federal President Richard von Weizsäcker. In 1987, he worked at the German Embassy in Moscow as political counsellor. He stayed there throughout German unification and the end of the Soviet Union. His next assignments were in the Foreign Office: planning staff, director for disarmament and arms control and European correspondent. In 2001, he was appointed Vice President of the Federal Intelligence Service (BND). From 2004 until 2008, he was president of the Federal College for Security Studies in Berlin. His last postings were Moscow (2008–2011) and London (2011–2014), where he ran the Embassy in 2013–2014 as Chargé d’Affaires. Dr. Adam is a regular contributor to German newspapers and weeklies. He runs seminars at Munich University and works as senior advisor with Berlin Global advisor.