

## EU is in no state to snub or bully Britain

### TELEGRAPH VIEW

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Elements of the EU reportedly do not accept the reality of Brexit – they imagine that a mix of rudeness and indifference can make it go away. They have even threatened to hold negotiations in French. We would urge readers to remain dispassionate: this is the EU leaders' game plan and, frankly, it betrays how weak their position truly is. Theresa May should respond with resilience – and lay out a confident vision of what Britain is trying to achieve.

The British are used to insults from the EU, so nothing coming out of the European Council meeting in Brussels has been a surprise. The messages have been mixed. European People's Party leader Manfred Weber said that the UK was attracting anger for its intransigence. And yet Lord Hill, the UK's former Brussels commissioner, spoke of a "surprisingly widely-held view that Britain might still decide to stay in" – something Donald Tusk, president of the European Council, said that he hoped would happen. Mrs May was given just five minutes to discuss Brexit after dinner on Thursday night.

This behaviour betrays fantasy and arrogance. But also distraction – for the EU leaders have a lot of other, local problems to worry about. Their failure to conclude a free-trade deal with Canada has been symbolic. Getting all 28 European members to agree to a deal was tough enough – but constituencies within constituencies threw up barriers. Belgium as a whole was for it. The Belgian region of Wallonia, on the other hand, was against it, holding up progress for everyone else. Canada's trade minister concluded that the EU is "incapable" of forging international agreements. The British have known this for years, and it is one of the most compelling reasons why they voted Leave.

Then there are internal economic strains: ongoing crisis in Mediterranean markets, turbulence in Deutsche Bank. The refugee crisis continues to pose challenges for national security and will only be resolved with Britain's help. Nor would the Europeans want to encourage a rift across the English Channel while squaring off against Russia – and Mrs May rightly called for a united stand among democratic Western nations.

Finally, some of the EU leaders may not be around in a year's time. Populism is rising at home and several of them will eventually have to face their own version of Brexit-style rebellion. François Hollande, for instance, may well be on borrowed time. When he said of the UK's exit "There must be a threat, there must be a risk, there must be a price," it was not only to weaken British resolve but to shore up a few votes back home. We do not need yesterday's anniversary of Trafalgar to remind us that the popularity of Britain among the French has gone up and down throughout history.

The attitude of EU leaders, though regrettable, is to be expected. Attacking Brexit is a negotiating strategy. Why, then, do so many British commentators take their words literally? In some instances out of credulity; in others because they, too, want Brexit to go away. But it is not going away. The public voted for it, the Prime Minister knows that her future career depends upon delivering it. She has to play her cards close to her chest – hence she gave a press conference yesterday that was guarded and rather vague.



European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker kisses Britain's Prime Minister Theresa May as they pose for a family photo during a European Union leaders summit in Brussels, Belgium, October 20, 2016. CREDIT: REUTERS/Francois Lenoir

Greater confidence and greater clarity would be welcome. Clarity about ambitions would help convince anyone who genuinely thinks that Britain is going nowhere that we most certainly are. It would also set the proper tone for negotiations – to say “if you won’t be constructive, we will walk and can walk because we have a very good idea of where we are going to go.” Clarity would reassure the British public, too. It should give a sense of the fundamentals, of what Mrs May wants for Britain on education, free trade, the future of the City and the ability to sell goods on the continent. She has already demonstrated tremendous will and her astonishing poll lead over Labour implies that she stands shoulder-to-shoulder with most of the voters on the European issue. The Europeans must respect that mandate. Her authority to negotiate comes from the people.

