

## Europe learns to like 'hard Brexit' and a good British ally



[AMBROSE EVANS-PRITCHARD](#) IN ZURICH

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CREDIT: MICHELE LIMINA

The Brexit drama has taken an unexpected twist. Britain's strategy of full withdrawal from the single market and from the EU institutions has been remarkably well-received.

Contrary to fears in some quarters in Britain, the pursuit of a 'clean and hard' Brexit has if anything helped to clear the air, greeted with a degree of relief by political and business leaders in Europe.

What has changed the mood - apart from the passage of time - is the parallel pledge by Britain's leaders to stand beside Europe as a close strategic and military ally, playing its full part in upholding a rules-based global architecture.

There were signs at the World Economic Forum in Davos that the anger of recent months is slowly draining away, replaced by an acknowledgement of Britain's distinctive history and character. The imperative now is to limit the damage for all sides and find a way to make the new arrangement work. Not all divorces end in hostility.



Theresa May spoke in Davos this week CREDIT: MICHEL EULER

Emma Marcegaglia, head of the pan-EU federation BusinessEurope, said the no-nonsense nature of Britain's decision may prove to be the best outcome even if it is hard to accept on an emotional level.

"When I first saw Theresa May's speech my reaction was very bad, and I thought this is going to cause serious problems for British companies and for the rest of us," she said.

"But after thinking about it I now feel that her position is very straight and clear. In a certain sense it clarifies the situation. There could now be a [good free trade agreement](#), like the Canadian arrangement with access for both sides and social protection," she told the Telegraph.

"It is all so sad. We're going to miss the role of the UK in defending free trade and competition. The British commissioner was always a crucial ally for us in Brussels. But it is done now, and we just have to accept it," she said.

Belgium's ardently pro-integrationist foreign minister, Alexander De Croo, said the die has at last been cast and perhaps this is for the better. "At least the British have made up their minds and we now have some clarity. It was obviously not going to function if the UK had wanted to stay in the single market but seek controls on free movement," he said.

"People say we want to punish Britain but that is not the case at all. I don't like the result but it is what it is," he said, insisting that the imperative now is to prevent a destructive rupture that would be in nobody's interest.

"If you live in a street with neighbours, you want the next-door house to be well-maintained. It is never good if the building is broken down and in disrepair," he told the Telegraph.

For months the agreed script parroted by EU ministers from across the 27 states was that the UK must not be allowed to "cherry-pick" bits of EU membership that it wants.

This EU holding strategy was never coherent, given that Britain has deep military, security, and cultural ties with Europe that go far beyond the single market. It has now been overtaken by events. The new script - with some discordant notes from Malta, Slovakia, and others with limited experience of global statecraft - is that the EU has no intention of retribution.

Italy's new premier Paolo Gentiloni said Europe will approach the Brexit talks in a spirit of "solidarity and friendship with the UK", while his Italian compatriot Mario Monti - Europe's elder statesman - said the air had finally cleared over recent days.



Mr Monti argued in the aftermath of the Brexit vote that it would be "collective suicide" for the EU to let the UK get away with Europe 'a la carte' CREDIT: RUBEN SPRICH

"We're getting down to business without any residual acrimony. So much in common remains," he said in Davos.

Mr Monti argued in the aftermath of the Brexit vote that it would be "collective suicide" for the EU to let the UK get away with Europe 'a la carte'. This concern has not entirely gone away, but is now fading. The likelihood of "British contagion" has diminished.

French foreign minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, insisted that "we don't want to punish the UK. That is not the position of France." Whether or not he means this, his government will soon be gone, probably replaced by 'souverainiste' leaders with less purist views about the EU Project.

Europeans listened with some scepticism to Theresa May's speech in Davos: a 'recycled' version of her Lancaster House talk two days earlier, was the verdict of the *Suddeutsche Zeitung*.

She assured them that Brexit was not aimed at the break-up of Europe. "I want the EU to continue to be strong and I want to continue to have a close and strategic partnership with the EU. With the threats we face it's not the time for less co-operation."

Some sniffed insincerity. But these doubts are lessening as it emerges that Mrs May really does intend to champion the cause of Nato and the integrity EU itself in her forthcoming talks with US President Donald Trump.

Suddenly the value of Britain as a mid-Atlantic interlocutor has acquired some currency again, and in the most surprising way. Her promise to champion the EU cause from the outside is being seen in European capitals as the first step in a new British-EU relationship that could conceivably be better than at any time in recent years.

While Mrs May's speech to the global elites won only polite thin-lipped applause, her pitch for a free-trading Britain open to the world did succeed in shifting the needle of perceptions. The Chinese media - heavily present in Davos - wrote widely about her 'charm offensive', lavishing praise on her defence of globalisation.

The American media has been slower to grasp the point, in many cases misled by a reflexive conflation of Brexit and the Trump phenomenon. Yet the penny is slowly dropping. Chancellor Philip Hammond stressed in Davos that there was "no anti-trade rhetoric, no anti-globalist rhetoric" in the UK campaign. "One of the tenets of the Leave campaign was more trade with the rest of the world. It was absolutely [the opposite of what happened in the US](#)," he said.



Chancellor Philip Hammond stressed in Davos that there was "no anti-trade rhetoric, no anti-globalist rhetoric" in the UK campaign CREDIT: JASON ALDEN

Mr Hammond was something of a hit in Davos, gamely taking part in two hard-hitting seminars. He avoided the common error by WEF novices of posturing, instead getting into

the spirit of a soft-spoken intimacy that plays better at this unique venue . His reassuring manner helped to dispel lingering worries that Britain has been taken over by Poujadistes and tribalist nutters.

Most striking was the friendly tone from Germany, doubly so coming from the famously irascible Wolfgang Schauble, the country's super-finance minister. He has clearly found a soul-mate of sorts in the British Chancellor. They are both serious men.

"Phil Hammond and myself, we totally agree, we have to manage this decision by the British people in the best way. The UK remains a very important partner and we will do whatever we can," he said.

"We have to minimize the damage for the United Kingdom and Europe. The German government will work in the negotiations always in this direction, to minimize any risk for both of us," he said.

Mr Schauble is scarcely a man given to shallow romanticism. He is doggedly determined and hard-headed. He warned that the coming talks with Britain will not be a bed of roses. What looks hopeful, however, is that the worst poison of Anglo-European relations may at last have been drawn.