

# Europe's wicked problem

Quentin Peel looks at a series of essays on the effects of UK withdrawal

## **Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe**

*Edited by Benjamin Martill  
and Uta Staiger*  
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PDF

Across the European continent, the Brexit process is being watched with a mixture of confusion and consternation. The referendum decision of June 2016 to quit the European Union not only astonished the British political establishment, along with much of the business community, pollsters and political scientists, it also baffled most of the country's foreign partners and investors.

Apart from amazement at the decision itself, widely seen in Europe's capitals as a deeply regrettable act of national self-harm, the subsequent British negotiating tactics in Brussels are also regarded with bewilderment.

The lack of a clear UK government vision of the long-term relationship they want has left their EU partners frustrated.

Theresa May seems to want to pick and choose the bits of the single market where she will accept EU rules, such as pharmaceuticals and cars, and where she will not, such as financial services, farming and fisheries.

In a third 'basket', she will seek 'mutual recognition',

the principle on which the single market was once built. Brussels is adamant that the single market is what it says: a space with no 'cherry-picking'.

Investors are left assuming a stalemate, a hard Brexit that will be at best a free trade agreement in goods, excluding services, at worst no deal at all.

Given the enormity of the exercise, it is understandable that the debate in the UK for the past 20 months has focused overwhelmingly on the domestic consequences. In the rest of the European Union – with the notable exception of Ireland, which sees grave threats to its economy and the peace process – the temptation is to see the whole Brexit question as a peculiarly British affair.

That is a mistake. Not only do the causes of the Brexit vote go well beyond the peculiar circumstances of the British Isles, but its consequences for the rest of the EU are likely to be far-reaching. That is the core assumption in *Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe*, containing essays on the subject by 29 leading British and other European academics. It provides a welcome focus on the wider picture.

They all agree that Brexit will have very significant effects for the future of EU politics. What is not so clear – and the editors avoid attempting to draw any precise conclusions – is whether the effect of Brexit will be centrifugal or

centripetal: towards more fragmentation, or more integration.

The immediate effect of the Brexit vote was to increase pro-EU support in every other member state, with the sharpest rises recorded in normally Eurosceptic Denmark and in France. But all the contributors to the book agree that the EU still faces an unprecedented combination of crises, economic, political and institutional, and is urgently in need of reform.

Chris Bickerton, a reader in modern European politics at the University of Cambridge, sees Brexit as 'the tip of the iceberg', representative of 'a growing division in Europe on the matter of European integration'. It is part of a backlash against the EU single market, which prevents individual member states from pursuing national

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growth models. A sceptic from the left, he believes integration has gone too far, undermining 'the capacity of a state to represent ... the [national] collective and popular will'.

Luuk van Middelaar, from Leiden University, a former adviser to Herman Van Rompuy when president of the European Council, warns that 'marginal readjustments of a few policies or symbols' will not be enough to keep other EU voters on board. 'The EU urgently needs to strike a new balance' between economic freedoms and social protection, he says. 'It is a divide between ... voters who generally appreciate the EU for its freedom, openness and the opportunities it offers and ... those who ultimately fear the disorder and disruptions [from] migration, competition for jobs, or the loss of national sovereignty.' That means either minimizing the negative effects of economic freedom, or providing more order – not least at EU external borders.

Emmanuel Macron, France's passionately pro-EU president, wants much the same: 'a Europe that protects'. In his Sorbonne speech last September, Macron called for a big eurozone budget and a 'European Monetary Fund' to provide pre-crisis stabilization loans. He also wants a European defence union, stronger border security, and a common asylum policy. He calls it all 'political Europe'.

That sounds very much

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like ‘ever closer union’ or ‘more Europe’ – guaranteed to confirm all the deepest prejudices of British Brexiters. Can it be done? Much will depend on the support of Angela Merkel and her long-delayed grand coalition in Berlin. In principle she is very sympathetic but suspicion of French – and Italian – profligacy runs deep in the German body politic.

Simon Hix, professor of political science at the London School of Economics, fears that the knee-jerk reaction of ‘more Europe’ to any crisis – such as the eurozone, refugees, or Brexit – will no longer win public support. The European Commission’s plan – very similar to French thinking on the eurozone, defence and a common asylum policy – is simply too ambitious in a heterogeneous EU. It includes extending the single market in energy, digital and services. ‘This sort of ratcheting forward of integration is unlikely to work,’ he says. Instead, he proposes ‘decentralized federalism’ – a sort of variable geometry in which framework rules are agreed by majority voting, but the details are left to national governments. It sounds even more complicated than what we have now.

Kalypso Nicolaïdis, professor of international relations at the University of Oxford, questions the dichotomy about ‘more versus less’ Europe. The EU should focus on substance, such as climate change or

conflict resolution. She wants ‘sustainable integration’, with the emphasis on environmental sustainability, and something called ‘demoicracy’, which is ‘a union of peoples, defined both as citizens and states, who govern together but not as one’.

What does that mean? It is not clear to me that such laudable theories can be turned into political reality. But what this collection of essays does is at least set out the post-Brexit challenges, even if they do not provide any obvious answers.

According to the editors, Brexit is a classic example of a ‘wicked problem’, by which they mean it is ‘characterized by having innumerable, complex causes, yet no precedent’. Each wicked problem is unique, and there are no right or wrong answers, only good or bad ones.

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