



Jean Monnet Chair Blog on Europe Competition 2017

Brexit-EU relations: A Messy Divorce

By Darren Bullen

What was already an uneasy relationship, has soured into something that resembles a bitter divorce between a couple. With squabbling over the divorce bill and the access rights for the children (i.e. the citizens on both sides of the channel), the relations between the UK and the EU have become very bitter. The UK, a nation with a history as colonial power and where the great industrial revolution began, sees Brexit as its opportunity to sprout its wings again and engage in free trade with the rest of the world. But for the EU, Brexit is seen as nothing but Britain abandoning its European brothers and turning its back on the great European dream. Yet Britain has never been fully committed to this relationship and has always had one leg outside the door. Two years after joining the EU (or the EEC as it was known then), Britain was already heading for the exit as Harold Wilson's Labour government was split over the country's membership. In 2003 Gordon Brown was able to hold off Tony Blair's attempt to join the single currency. In 2016 a marginal vote to leave the EU won the referendum, splitting Britain almost in half. But 14 months on from the referendum and nothing appears to have been resolved.

Jean-Claude Juncker leaked details of his dinner with Theresa May released to a German newspaper, including passages in which he claimed that May was "deluded over Brexit". The EU furthermore began to tout a so-called "Brexit bill" in the regions of £50-£100 billion, which is supposedly to cover the long-term commitments Britain has signed up to, leading Liam Fox to accusing the EU of trying to blackmail Britain to speed up a deal. Another factor are the financial sector and Britain's Euro clearing houses, the relocation of which the French President Emmanuel Macron openly supported in his election campaign together with the demand that Britain should pay for leaving the EU.

With all this, it is really hard to see how anything can be achieved in the coming negotiations – especially as Britain's political turmoil has left the government with a weaker negotiating hand and because the strengthened EU 27 rally together in solidarity. But at some point heads need to cool down and a more grown-up and realistic stance needs to be taken by both parties. A "No deal" scenario on trade is bad for both sides, and squabbling over financial settlements and how best to punish the UK for leaving all forget that it is ordinary lives that get hurt the most from this divorce. The children (the citizens) are the ones who will be affected the most. They are the ones left in limbo over settlement rights and will suffer the financial hardships if no deal is reached. Thus, a return to cooler heads and a softer rhetoric is needed more than ever from both parties.