

Mammoth Divorce Bills: The EU and the Surrender of the Brexiters

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The parties had been groping (appropriate, given the daily revelations about harassment) for some common ground. There had been discussions about having further discussions, hedging, ducking and weaving. In a dysfunctional relationship, options tend to shrink rather than expand. And so it turned out in the latest round of Brexit negotiations between the May government and officials of the European Union.

As much in the manner of marriage revolves around cash and valuables, the issue of the divorce bill was never going to go away. If anything, it was marching towards British diplomats with promising menace.

The figure on the table induces dizzy wonder: somewhere up to 55 billion euros to be paid in staggered installments over four decades. This was the British offer, and it seemed awfully resonant of surrender. As the foreign secretary, [Boris Johnson](#), chirped, “Now’s the time to get the ship off the rocks.”

Truly, a different tune to the [Johnson](#) of July’s bullish colours, who proclaimed with avid enthusiasm in the Commons that the “sums I have seen that [the EU] propose to demand from this country seem to me to be extortionate and I think ‘to go whistle’ is an entirely appropriate expression.” The usual Mt. Olympus clap-trap, a sell for those far below, involved getting “a great deal”. Oh, and yes, “there was a time when Britain was not what we then called the common market.”

That similar tone was struck by Prime Minister Theresa May on invoking [Article 50](#) in March, thereby triggering the Brexit process. In doing so, she claimed that it was time to “make our own decisions and our own laws... to take control of the things that matter most to us.”

Tides have changed, optimism soured and odds lengthened on Britain’s chances for a robust arrangement. The EU’s chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, after six rounds of uneasy talks with David Davis, the Brexit secretary, was firm with what he saw as mere chatter before serious negotiations: the UK had a fortnight to settle its debts or sabotage any prospect of working through a transitional deal that would ease the concerns of British business.

While Davis called for “creativity and flexibility on both sides,” [Barnier](#) was merely interested in the next stage.

“We are not asking for concessions, nor are we planning to offer any ourselves, we are working on facts.”

A fait accompli had presented itself. A process “dressed up as a negotiation,” in the words of [Charles Grant](#), director of the Centre for European Reform but really “a story of the British taking time to realise that they have got to accept what the EU demands of them.” This, in other words, is what leaving the EU looks like: total bureaucracy, implied threat, and stifling control.

Even now, the process, and amount, is problematic. The figure of 45-55 billion euros is a starting point, a grudging acceptance by the May government that the hawks in Brussels must be placated, their bowls filled. Amounts continue to swirl, but this is a starting point that will cause consternation.

“We’ve said,” claimed transport secretary [Chris Grayling](#), “that we’ll meet our obligations, we’ve said that that needs to be part of a broader agreement - that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.”

Grayling, for all his circular reasoning, felt obliged to provide a few crumbs to press questions, though they supplied minimal nourishment. “Good progress” had been made, though on what he could not say, but, with typical Bull Dog obliviousness, he suggested that “we can move on to trade talks at the European Council.”

Some of the Tories are distinctly unhappy with these proposals, preferring to pitch the World Trade Organisation terms as a framework for negotiations. But rather than being in the cabinet, they remain, bullets at the ready, on the perimeter. [Julian Smith](#), the new chief whip, may well find his in tray filled with requests from members of the pro-Brexit European Research Group to ease the means by which the payments are to be made.

The mess is also compounded by a range of other internal disagreements. No one can quite accept that Her Britannic Majesty’s government should be forking out quite that much; nor is there consensus about the nature of how favourable trade terms can be secured. Others want to get out yet somehow still be that lingering member at a dying cocktail party.

The selling point for irate Brexit-types is the sense that the divorce be genuine, firm, and final. But these types have gone somewhat quiet of late, even as the appropriate flag has been raised.

“When the time came to hoist the white flag,” noted [Dan Roberts](#), “the cabinet’s swashbuckling Brexiters were nowhere to be seen.”

The former UKIP leader, [Nigel Farage](#), not being a negotiator or in the cabinet, continues to luxuriate at a splendid, polemical distance. No deal, he claims, need be reached at all, showing his usual firm grasp of the realities.

“I have always argued that no deal is better than a bad deal. Make no mistake about it, 55bn euros to leave the EU is a very, very bad deal.”

With shades of a future stab-in-the-back claim, Farage insists that Britain get more. In a sense he is right - the terms seem bruising on the wallet, but they were essentially promised. What irks him more is that the very thing Brexiters thought would not happen - the prizing out of the common market - has real prospects of taking place.

“For a sum of this magnitude to be agreed in return for nothing more than a promise of a decent settlement on trade represents a complete and total sell out.”

Crestfallen and browbeaten, British negotiators await the next, even more bruising round.

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