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# France, Britain and Brexit

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## 2017: a year of disruption

Brexit, and the election of Emmanuel Macron, have galvanised the political environments in Britain and France, respectively. Each development is, in its own way, highly disruptive of the status quo. If the mantra of disruption is 'to move fast and break things' (BBC Radio Four 2017), then the election of Macron to the French presidency and the wholesale success of his political movement La République en Marche (LREM) in the French National Assembly fits the bill entirely. Macron and his party sped to power in little over 12 months and the French political landscape is, for now, littered with the debris of the political parties that he – and LREM – outwitted. In the business world, disruptive change involves stealing a march on one's incumbents whose customers initially deem the new product to be inferior (Christensen et al. 2015). Substitute Macron for 'product' and voters for 'customers', and here, too, the analogy is not so far-fetched (if unpleasant).

In the case of Brexit, the process can hardly be described as 'fast' but as time goes on, finding evidence that Brexit will *not* be inferior to EU membership is becoming harder and harder. Moreover, the UK's withdrawal from the EU is by definition a matter of 'breaking things', and the Franco-British relationship will certainly not be left undisturbed by the separation. At the same time, Brexit in fact fits perfectly into a cross-Channel friendship that for centuries has been marked by competition, collaboration, rivalry and change. No one should have been surprised that the UK's shock decision by referendum to withdraw from the EU was greeted in France in part as an opportunity for French competitive

advantage. 'Let the expatriates return!', exclaimed French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe when presenting his government's legislative programme to the National Assembly (Philippe 2017). The French leader was making a general point about France's future, but on the specifics of Brexit, such overtures have been just as common as expressions of regret. Given that 'Year One' of Brexit (from the referendum of 23 June 2016 to the UK general election of 8 June 2017) coincided with the French electoral marathon – culminating in the presidential and parliamentary elections in May and June 2017 respectively – it was particularly likely that Brexit would serve as electoral bait across the French political spectrum.

## Brexit and the EU in the 2017 French elections

According to Édouard Philippe, the results of those elections can be taken as evidence that the French remain firmly attached to the EU and the euro, since they voted for a candidate – Emmanuel Macron – who openly embraced France's European identity (Philippe 2017). 'Frexit' was certainly averted in the 2017 elections, despite being on the electoral ticket. One candidate, François Asselineau, had openly campaigned for Frexit but scored less than 1 per cent (0.92 per cent) of the votes in the first round of the presidential elections. Two other presidential candidates – Marine Le Pen and Jean-Luc Mélenchon – fought highly Eurosceptic campaigns and achieved significant scores: in the first round the two candidates between them won just over 40 per cent of the votes combined (a total of over 14 million votes); and in the second round, Le Pen broke through the barrier of 10 million votes with a score of 33.9 per cent of the total (against Macron's 66.1 per cent).

The entire thrust of Mélenchon's campaign was to rail against the idea of a 'submissive' France. Applied to the question of Europe, this translated into a Plan A: to radically reform the EU treaties along with other Member States wishing to free themselves (as Mélenchon saw it) from, in particular, the rigours of eurozone governance. If Plan A failed, then Plan B was for France to unilaterally 'leave' the EU's treaty framework ('the EU: change it or leave it'). In the case of Marine Le Pen, the horrors of the EU, as she portrayed them, were both central to her platform and a factor in her loss of the second-round presidential vote to Macron. Her number one proposal (out of 144) was to 'recover France's national sovereignty in a Europe of independent nations at the service of its peoples' (Le Pen 2017), much as proponents of Brexit aim to 'take back control'. She would negotiate this recovery of France's 'monetary,

legislative, territorial and economic sovereignties' (Le Pen 2017) with her EU counterparts, and put the result to the French people in a referendum. For Le Pen, Brexit was inspirational, representing, in her eyes, nothing less than the liberation of the British people. Unfortunately for Le Pen, she performed badly when debating these issues on live TV, especially in the head-to-head debate with Macron between the first and second rounds of the presidential elections. Apparently unsure of her technical ground, her visceral emotions were laid bare for anyone who chose to see.

## Sixty years of French engagement with the EU: at what cost?

Nevertheless, were the French to hold an 'in–out' referendum of its own on the subject of its EU membership, we would be unwise to predict the outcome. 'Frexit' was evidently no longer unthinkable by the time of the 2017 elections in France. Previous referendums in France on EU affairs have seen either narrow victories for further integration (as with Maastricht in 1993) or rejections (the Constitutional Treaty in 2005), and French public support for EU membership remains shaky (Eurobarometer, 2017). Generations of French politicians since 1945 have proclaimed their commitment to European integration in the form of a promise 'to make Europe without unmaking France' (see Bossuat 2006; Drake & Reynolds 2017, 111), but France's relations with the EU are problematic for domestic French politics, and have been for some time. In this respect, France and the UK are not so dissimilar in their quandary over what it means to be an EU Member State.

In 2011, the Economist's Intelligence Unit downgraded France from a 'full' to a 'flawed' democracy on the specific grounds that its response to the eurozone crisis – agreeing to more stringent oversight of national finances by Brussels – was undermining national democracy (Drake & Reynolds 2017, 113; Economist Intelligence Unit 2011). By the time of the 2012 presidential elections, the extent to which France was integrated into the EU was made more explicit by the leading presidential candidates than was typically the case; they could hardly do otherwise in the context of the EU's ongoing crises (financial and migratory, to name but two). That election, it has been argued, was an unprecedentedly 'Europeanised contest' whereby candidates joined the dots between national political competition (the presidential election) and EU-level policy orientation (Dehousse & Tacea 2012, 16). They did so overwhelmingly to oppose the EU in some shape or form. The appeal of the two

leading Eurosceptic candidates of 2017 seen above – Mélenchon and Le Pen – was certainly established in this 2012 contest (between them they won almost 30 per cent of the votes in the first round). But front runners François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy were also critical of the EU's handling of the crises, and raised expectations that they would be the president to improve EU affairs.

Constitutionally speaking, French presidents do have considerable leeway over European policymaking. Institutionally, they also have far more of a free hand than, say, the UK prime minister has: as Rozenberg (2016) has demonstrated, they are simply not held to account by their parties in Parliament in the same way. (We have seen how unwelcoming UK Prime Minister Theresa May has become to her parliamentary opposition on the matter of Brexit.) But to bring their party to power in the first place, French presidential candidates have to clear the hurdle of the two-round voting system of the presidential election. They have to 'catch all' in their electoral camp, Europhiles and Eurosceptics alike, by means of a 'synthetic vision of Europe' (Rozenberg 2016). This is a vision that papers over the cracks in their own parties and in the camp that delivered 50+ per cent of the national vote, and stores up problems for the next elections. President Macron, as we saw above, came to power by creating a new political camp entirely. In so doing, he neatly side-stepped the previous 'laws of nature', and created an opportunity (however ephemeral) for French-led disruption on the EU stage.

## Towards a 'political Europe'?

It would seem from President Macron himself that the plan is to secure a 'political Europe'. This is anything but original. For Rozenberg (2016, 2), '[t]he solution of a 'political Europe' is so regularly put forward that the idea has become polymorphous and even meaningless'. It certainly is a mainstay of French discourse on the EU, and it does arguably have some shape, at least conceptually. In Macron's own words, a political Europe is a 'voluntary and realistic association of states' that have agreed upon 'useful policies' on matters such as the freedom of movement of goods and people, and especially young people, security, monetary and fiscal affairs, and culture (Macron 2017). Macron differs little from his predecessors here in rationalising European integration as a matter for national states and governments (over and above free markets, and in theory favouring the long term and the strategic); as a project defined by fundamental values

(freedom, peace, progress); and as an expression of Europe's potential as a global actor.

This is a vision that is airily dismissive of the EU's actual nature as an intensely rules-based system of governance and, true to French form, Macron mocks the EU for its 'tyranny of agendas and calendars', likening the EU to neighbours in crisis-management mode, no longer trusting each other to run their communal assets and instead devising ever more rules to govern their interactions (Macron 2017). He attributes Euroscepticism in general, and Brexit in particular, to such distractions, as he sees them. He, in contrast, is impatient to get back to basics. By the end of 2017, says Macron, he will initiate 'democratic conventions' all across Europe to get the continent back onto this political footing – a Europe that unites people. Member States can sign up or not, as they wish, he breezily announces. This, he claims, is a job for a new generation of political leaders, and perhaps here he has a point. Brexit, we should note in contrast, is being handled in the UK by an existing generation of leaders, many of whom appear unable or unwilling to escape the shadow of the past when it comes to the UK's relations with the EU, and many of whom are seeking, if anything, to go backwards not forwards. With reference to both the EU–UK Brexit negotiations and Macron's plans for a political Europe, Kuper's (2017) argument against relying on rhetoric rather than a gritty engagement with the rules seems timely.

In the case of France there is some sense of more concrete priorities, and Brexit is towards the bottom of the list. It features as one of three EU-level negotiations that Prime Minister Édouard Philippe has identified as 'crucial', the others being the 'redefinition of our project as 27 with Germany and those of our partners who want to move ahead'; and the EU's financial perspectives for beyond 2020 (Philippe 2017). Above and beyond this triad of talks come two broader priorities for France. The first is to 'reconcile' the French with the EU; the second is to build a 'Europe that protects' (via improved eurozone governance; progress on EU defence policy and 'social convergence', and the development of a commercial policy based on reciprocity). These two ideas – restoring public confidence in the EU and in French leaders' ability to lead it, and re-orientating EU policy – are not remotely new, and flow from the 'political Europe' goal outlined above. As such, Macron's best hope for results lies in French engagement on the ground. By way of example, the Franco-German Council in July 2017 ended with an announcement of plans for a joint ('European') fighter jet. Whilst this signalled shared intentions to bolster the EU's

autonomous defence capacity, the initiative for now raises far more questions than answers (*Le Monde* 2017).

## Negotiating change ...

Will France will be any more successful at re-engaging with the EU under Macron's leadership than the UK will be at disengaging via Brexit? To succeed in either case implies productive negotiations with the other EU Member States and with the EU's own institutions. Productive negotiations, in turn, require the primary parties (in the case of Brexit, the EU Commission and the UK government) to be both properly constituted and fully functional (see Crump 2006). Year One of Brexit has already provided much food for thought in these regards and could be instructive by comparison for the French case.

By properly *constituted* we mean they must have clearly defined roles and cohesive and predictable support from supporting parties (such as junior partners in a government coalition). Taking the example of Brexit once more, the parties to the negotiations and their roles are highly structured on the EU side by dint of Treaty provision and the negotiations guidelines and directives that have flowed from them (European Commission 2017c, European Council 2017a). On the UK side, the cohesion and predictability of the primary party – the UK government – has been weakened since the UK general election of 8 June 2017, in which the Conservative government lost its majority in the House of Commons.

Second, to be *functional* means at the very least to be able to own the problem or the opportunity, to identify it as such; to take decisions; and to communicate those decisions as required (Crump 2006, 2). The EU party to the Brexit negotiations is for now fully functional: agreed on what Brexit means for the EU, agreed on how they want to talk about it with the UK government, in what sequence and by which deadlines. To date, they have communicated their interests coherently, and speak with one voice. The solidarity of the EU27 may well fray when it comes to decision-making time, but they have entered the talks in good shape. In contrast, the UK party is dysfunctional. Rhetorically, the government has defined Brexit as an unrivalled and unprecedented opportunity for the UK, but this has yet to be translated into a negotiations script and is contested, even within the government. In term of its decision-making capacity, the UK government has explicitly bound itself by the 'will of the British people' as expressed in outcome of the 23 June 2016 referendum. Since that referendum, the

courts and Parliament have predictably entered the decision-making arena since even the 'will of the people' must be implemented via due democratic process. Owning and communicating these facts – that the UK is a weak and dysfunctional negotiations party at a Brexit negotiations table where the power is stacked against it – is understandably challenging.

## ... Or change through disruption?

For France and in contrast, negotiating its way back in to a position of power and influence within the EU27 should be far less fraught. France is well constituted as a negotiating partner following Macron and LREM's victories at the 2017 elections. Moreover, it is functional: Macron 'owned' Europe from the night of his election victory on Sunday 7 May onwards, by appropriating symbols such as the EU anthem and the EU flag; Macron and his government have identified the EU as an opportunity; and to communicate all this, France's current leaders are deploying a familiar rhetoric of 'political Europe' with the intention of disarming the Euroscepticism that has taken root in French political parties and public opinion alike. On the other side of the table are individual Member States and the EU institutions. There is no joint bloc to face France down, nor are France's partners brandishing a ticking clock. The complex and heightened emotions that characterise the Brexit negotiations are less of an issue in France's relations with the EU.

But there are time pressures on Macron and his government to deliver on their electoral promises (and not only on EU affairs). The presidency is 'fast' – a short five years (Cole 2012); expectations are high and the political climate is troubled. The very nature of Macron's disruption of the status quo creates conditions in the political environment that threaten France's ability to negotiate change at the EU level. We saw above that he is supported politically by a new camp that is untried and untested, and this potentially weakens the constitution – the coherence – of France as a negotiating partner. Indeed, the first weeks of the new government witnessed numerous ministerial resignations and reshuffles. Then there are threats to the functionality of France as an EU partner, and would-be leading partner at that. In particular, the risk of domestic distractions is high, given the controversial agenda of socioeconomic change and the several false starts already made in this regard, and this will drain attention and decision-making resources (including political capital) away from the French executive.

## Conclusions

We have seen above that in the case of both France and the UK, 2017 will have been a year of some reckoning. In particular and for both countries, EU membership came to dominate the political agenda and capture people's emotions. In neither case was the status quo deemed sustainable. Accordingly, and on either side of the Channel, political leaders are engaged in challenging conversations with their domestic and EU constituencies. The end game is change, and the method is disruption. Strictly speaking, disruption is not negotiated change. It is a method of challenging the status quo that relies on creativity, speed and luck. Its intent is positive in the sense of growth: of markets, market share and consumer choice. But 'moving fast and breaking things' is a high-risk strategy in the business world, and in the political environment may well come at very high cost. Brexit and the Macron effect have broken their respective moulds, and we await the outcomes with much interest.