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# Burke and Brexit: the UK's chief negotiator displays a lack of concern about trade risks and accountability



*Ahead of the government's publication of its negotiating approach to agreeing a future relationship with the EU, the UK's chief negotiator, David Frost, gave a speech that referenced the work of Edmund Burke. [Pippa Catterall](#) argues that Frost distorted Burke's views, and in doing so displays a shallow and muddled understanding of the risk and uncertainty ahead.*

Britain's chief negotiator for the next phase of Brexit, David Frost, set out his stall in a [speech in Brussels](#) on 17 February. It contained plenty of questionable constitutional assertions. For instance, Frost's statement that 'Independence does not mean a limited degree of freedom in return for accepting some of the norms of the central power' applies far more to Scotland's relationship to the UK than it ever did to Britain's position in Europe.

Commentary from expert trade negotiators also picked out the various large and dubious assumptions Frost made. First, it does not follow from his ability to cast doubt on the detail of econometric studies of Brexit's impact that his unsupported optimism is warranted.

Second, while he may be right that trade does not drive productivity, he adduces no hard evidence that Brexit is the magic bullet that will somehow reverse the UK's long-term productivity problem. Third, there is instead simply an inference that Brexit will mean that Britain's regulatory framework will be more nimble and thus incubate more investment and the productivity that it hopefully promotes. The speed of British decision-making on infrastructure projects unclouded by EU interference, such as a new runway in South-East England or the Northern Powerhouse, suggests such confidence may be misplaced. The role of public inquiries in such processes might suggest that Frost's fourth assumption – that getting 'people involved in making decisions' will produce better and faster ones – is equally unsound. In any case, Frost has shown little enthusiasm for involving interested parties, such as businesses, in his negotiations. Presumably the reason why he is leading these negotiations as an unelected bureaucrat, rather than a minister in the House of Lords (which could easily have been contrived), is to ensure that Parliament has minimal involvement or opportunity to scrutinise him too.

Fifth, how much sovereignty can a polity realistically claim when it is less than 3% of world trade and is, as Frost admits, peculiarly open to trade flows? Frost may have been keen to play down the importance of non-tariff barriers. But the notion that Britain will be able to determine its own regulatory standards in trade negotiations will likely be seen as unrealistic in Washington as well as Brussels, as anyone who has been paying attention to American discussions about trade deals will readily have noticed. Not that, sixth, Frost made any effort to acknowledge the American elephant in the room.

Instead Frost's speech told us more about what he knows about the eighteenth-century Irish political thinker and Whig politician, Edmund Burke (1729–97). Keen students of the legacy of Thatcherism will notice the shift from one eighteenth-century influence who loomed large in her era, Adam Smith, to this curious emphasis on Burke among contemporary Tories. Burke was only retroactively inducted into the pantheon of Tory thinkers in the 1920s, long after his death. Frost nonetheless claims that 'lots of modern British conservative politicians...would consider themselves to be intellectual heirs of Burke'. Quite which bit of Burke they revere is, however, obscure. Presumably it is not the Burke who condemned the excesses of British imperialism in India.

Oddly, Frost passes up the aspect of Burke's legacy that he could most obviously bend to his purpose. This is Burke's sympathy with the American colonists in the 1770s. Perhaps even Frost is unwilling to claim parallels from the success of the American secession from Britain for the very different situation of Brexit Britain? Or perhaps he recognises that this would not help him to make his case. Indeed, it would lay bare his deceit that Britain is regaining 'independence'. As a former diplomat, Frost should know that only a country with such independence can peacefully exercise the right to secede from what are at bottom treaty relations, without needing the American colonists' use of force to throw off the British yoke.

Frost may also be aware that Burke was not a sympathiser with secession. His view, instead, was that the constitution had become unbalanced in the 1760s and that the colonists were, like him and his political confederates on this side of the Atlantic, seeking to rebalance it. It was not secession but the need for checks and balances on the arbitrary exercise of power that Burke championed.

Hence the emphasis on partnership in the one substantial passage from Burke that Frost quotes, early in his speech. In it Burke argues:

The state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in a trade of pepper and coffee, calico or tobacco, or some other such low concern. It is to be looked on with reverence....It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection.

Frost uses this passage instrumentally to claim that the EU has moved from the low concerns of trade that Frost himself is employed to negotiate, and has become some kind of state. If Frost really grasped the nature of eighteenth-century trade he would also know that this is a false dichotomy. Burke, like all eighteenth-century statesmen, was well aware of the role of the state – often at gunpoint – in trade. Indeed, he spent much of his career deprecating this kind of behaviour by the British state in India.

For Burke, reining in such misconduct required the balanced constitution which he felt George III threatened in the 1760s and 1770s, and that the French revolutionaries threatened on their side of the Channel in the 1790s. It is from Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) that Frost derives his quotation.

In the process, Frost takes Burke totally out of context. After all, Frost makes clear that his purpose is to praise the revolution he claims is being realised in the twenty-first century by 'the revival of the nation state'. Let's leave aside Frost's dubious equation of a composite monarchy (the clue is in the proper title of the state – the United Kingdom) with the notion of a nation state. It is sufficient to point out that Burke, unlike Frost, was praising neither revolution nor nationalism. For him the state rested on an ordered partnership, rather than allegiance to principles or people or patriotism.

Frost may have evoked Burke. This, however, seems to have been an entirely spurious attempt to claim the legacy of Burke's vision of an organic and balanced society. For in all key aspects Frost either misapplies Burke or opposes him entirely. This is most obvious in his risibly using *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in support of Frost's own enthusiasm for a nationalistic overturning of international order for unstated and undefined 'great things'. This offends against Burke's own warnings of the dangers of abstract thinking and of playing God by assuming that some magic bullet like Brexit can somehow solve all problems.

Yet it is also obvious in Frost's own role. A running theme of Burke's thought was the need to balance power and make it accountable in the perfect partnership that Frost, citing Burke, spoke of in his speech. But there is not much sign that Frost – who went out of his way to signal his status as a true believer in Brexit – is actually committed to any such partnership. In contrast to his opposite number, Michel Barnier, he is also seemingly untrammelled by responsibility to Parliament, despite the great importance of his work. This is hardly Burkean.

Frost's misrepresentation of Burke matters as much as his dubious assumptions about trade and economics. It suggests a failure to think through anything he said in Brussels, and reluctance to even recognise the shallowness of his observations. It betokens a willingness to twist words and to make unfounded claims in support of a project which seems to matter to Frost more than the country on whose behalf he claims to act. It indicates an enthusiasm to revolutionise the international trading order without any clear idea of what might replace it, an ambition that Burke would surely deplore. Finally, as with his masters, Cummings and Johnson, it demonstrates a tendency to masquerade nationalistic prejudice with supposed erudition.

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## About the Author



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