

Taking back control – but not just yet. The UK's post-Brexit future is now in Germany's hands

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 *With each passing day since the referendum it gets more and more obvious that there is no plan or model emerging from Vote Leave to take the country forward into negotiations. The absurdity of this is obvious, but here **Charles Lees** looks at how this hands power to Germany, whilst also outlining the domestic power struggles that Angela Merkel is herself navigating.*

The pavlovian slogan of the successful Brexit campaign was 'take back control'. More than half of voters voted Leave, confident in the fallacious belief that they would wake up on Friday morning having done so. As the dust settles on the referendum it helps no one to rehearse once more the arguments for and against the wisdom of Brexit. But it is baffling to observe the lack of due diligence undertaken by the Leave camp on what would actually happen on the morning after their startling political victory. UKIP, from its original incarnation as the Anti-Federalist League a quarter of a century earlier, and the post-Bruges speech Tory Eurosceptic wing have had long enough to think about it.

Consider the amount of clever and opinionated politicians, think-tankers, and journalists, and the parade of seminars and symposiums, drinks receptions and pitches to potential backers, they have attended in the past 25 years. It is unforgiveable that after all that there was no specific model for Brexit that the Leave team felt confident enough to put to the people.

This means there is now no specific model to put to our European partners either, creating a vacuum of political leadership that has left the UK vulnerable to market turmoil and subject to the political machinations in Brussels. As has been discussed across the media, the example of Brexit further endangers the existence of an EU already weakened by the Eurozone and Refugee crises, and where the governing parties of the key member states France and Germany are under pressure from right wing populist challengers. Inevitably, the best interests of the UK may not be at the top of political agendas on the Continent.

As with the Eurozone and Refugee crises, Germany is leading the way in coordinating Europe's response to the Brexit vote. The Monday after the Brexit vote saw Angela Merkel meet with French and Italian leaders in Berlin to co-ordinate before the two-day meeting of the European Council in Brussels. Merkel has so far proved to be a calming influence: counselling caution and offering the UK some breathing space to overcome its current multiple domestic political crises.

But it would be a mistake for the UK to take the German Chancellor's support for granted in the aftermath of Brexit. Day 2 of the European Council meeting saw the UK excluded as the so-called 'informals' stage of Brexit got underway. Merkel's opening salvo that 'today is not about him, it is about us' provides a taste of what is to come.

And there is a lot to come. Scottish MEP Alyn Smith may have called for 'cool heads and warm hearts' to guide the process but there are many powerful voices in the EU who feel differently. Some, like Commission President Jean Claude Juncker and European Parliament President Martin Schulz, wish to make an example of the UK for the sake of the EU's future coherence and prevent secessionist contagion from the UK. Others, like French President Francois Hollande, see more practical opportunities in Brexit – in particular facilitating the transfer of the Euro-related financial industry from the City of London to Paris. Germany will do a lot to determine the shape and scope of the UK's post-Brexit deal and whether the process will be one of 27 plus one or 27 *versus* one. Will the Article 50 process and the negotiations over future relations (for instance in trade, security, law enforcement) be concluded in a constructive and coordinated fashion or will the UK find itself in a post-Brexit limbo, reliant on WTO terms of trade for years to come as it argues its future from a position of weakness?

In determining the tone to be adopted, Merkel will keep a firm eye on Germany's domestic politics. There are three state elections to come in September this year (in Mecklenburg – Vorpommern, Niedersachsen, and Berlin) as well as a Federal election in September 2017. In the aftermath of the refugee crisis, Merkel is not as popular as she once was and her Christian Democratic party is under pressure from the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany, or AfD. On the one hand, Merkel will not want to do anything that provides comfort to right-wing populism at home but, on the other, being seen to want to punish Britons for making their democratic voice heard might do just that anyway. Merkel's current social democratic coalition partners also have a distinct view on Brexit. At present, SPD Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier seems content to re-enforce Merkel's attempts to moderate the tone of Europe's Brexit discussions. But this may change as the 2017 Federal election approaches.

Perhaps Merkel's most helpful potential allies for accommodating the UK, however, are German exporters. German industry enjoys unrivalled influence in Germany and German policy makers are normally loath to do anything to undermine *Deutschland AG's* export prowess. Before the referendum the German Business Association, or BDI, had warned against imposing punitive terms of trade on the UK. Since the Brexit vote, the President of the Carmakers' Association Matthias Wissmann has re-iterated this view. Merkel will not want to be seen to be putting German jobs at risk in order to punish the UK.

So where does this leave us? Voters in the Brexit referendum were persuaded that a vote for Leave was an opportunity to 'take back control'. The fact that this and countless other articles and blogs written this week are focused on machinations on the other side of the channel is clear evidence that the opposite is the case. Britain has lost control of its

immediate future and the small minority of genuine Little Englanders in the Leave camp might want to reflect on the irony that the shape of our post-Brexit future is to a great extent now in Germany's hands.

About the Author

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