

# Brexit and France

by Michael Curtis



**Here they are,** two groups of sleepy people by dawn's early light, and too much to discuss about Brexit to say good night.

The difficult is done at once; the impossible takes a little longer. On October 17, 2019 after three years of discussion in Britain and in the European Union, turbulence and acrimonious confrontations since the referendum on June 23, 2016 when the British electorate voted, 51.9% to 48.11%, to leave the European Union without any precise end arrangements, Britain and the EU agreed on a deal about Brexit, and on UK leaving the EU on October 31, 2019. Yet it is the beginning not the end of the negotiations between the two sides.

The British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, flamboyant and colorful has already done the impossible: president of the Oxford Union, elected mayor of London twice, foreign secretary, and now PM. He might have persuaded the passengers

on the Titanic that rescue was imminent. Johnson now needs a gift of political alchemy, recognizing that the Brexit summit is in sight, but it is shrouded in cloud. On Saturday October 20, the House of Commons will vote on the agreement with the EU.

The issue remains in doubt as one party, the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland, DUP, which holds only 10 seats in Parliament, usually an ally of the Tories who do not have a majority, has said it will not accept the agreement. They argue that the agreement introduces a customs-barriers between the region and the rest of the UK, and that it would weaken the bonds between Northern Ireland and the UK. Boris responds the deal avoids the creation of a physical border, a hard border, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, an EU member state. He argues that Northern Ireland, NI, will adhere to the EU single market rules on goods, and there will not be border checks. There will be no change in constitutional status at present, and any change need approval of the majority of the people of NI.

At the center of the acrimony and frustration has been the problem of avoiding creating a physical barrier between North Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Should NI be part of EU's tax regime for goods and services, or be given a special status so that businesses can trade freely with the EU? The DUP raises two issues: will it be in in a different customs area from the rest of UK; will it be consulted of any future arrangements in the region.

Boris has the task of achieving what may be impossible by convincing critical members of his own Tory party, as well as the 10 of DUP to change their minds and vote positively. Former PM Theresa May failed on a number of occasions to win a parliamentary majority for her Brexit proposals. The scenario remains to be written.

At its narrowest, the English Channel is only 21 miles, 33 km,

wide. Does an island and in Napoleon's words "a mere ditch" mean insularity? Some Britons feel that the significance of UK for long an imperial power as still shown on TV in Downton Abbey, and often punching above its weight will be reduced to that of a small island. "Fog in the Channel: Continent Cut Off," a classic British newspaper headline, may not be a correct account of relations with Europe, but there is an interesting continuation from President Charles de Gaulle to President Emmanuel Macron in attitudes of France to relations with Britain.

De Gaulle was the constant opponent of the UK entering what was then called the EEC, European Economic Community, a group of six members. The UK would have to give up its "special relationship" with the U.S. if it was serious about joining Europe. The UK had refused to join its predecessor, the European Coal and Steel Community, ECSC. De Gaulle made this clear to British leaders on various occasions. In a letter of November 15, 1958, the French President explained to PM Harold Macmillan, whom he had known during World War II when he was CIC of the Free French and Macmillan was the Minister Resident in Algiers who had supported de Gaulle instead of General Henri Giraud, who was FDR's favorite as leader of the Free French. De Gaulle held that the existence of a common market and the obligations entailed for member states were incompatible with UK plans for a single free trade area in Europe, and Macmillan and most British leaders did not like a full European federal state. UK would benefit from free trade. It imported cheap goods from the Commonwealth. It could enter the European industrial markets without a tariff while European agriculture could not enter the UK market tariff free. De Gaulle always opposed a free trade area. He repeated this opposition at a meeting with Macmillan in November 1962 at Rambouillet, the Renaissance chateau near Paris.

The crucial day was January 14, 1963, auspicious for various reasons: the Rolling Stones first played together as a group

in public; George C. Wallace was sworn in as Governor of Alabama, and de Gaulle held a press conference at the Elysee Palace. He was often deliberately ambiguous in his public utterances, but he was very clear, even brutal, in his rejection of Britain. De Gaulle had always insisted on French nationalism and grandeur, a European foreign policy under the leadership of France, and a suspicion of "Anglo-Saxons." At the press conference, de Gaulle opposed UK entrance into Europe. His reasoning was harsh. The "insular" character of UK has created a politico-economic structure which differed profoundly from that of continental Europe. The UK was maritime, bound by trade, by its markets to the most diverse array of countries, and often the most far-flung. It has a lot of industry and commerce, but very little agriculture, and its habits and traditions were very different.

The disappointed Macmillan wrote in his diary that the French always betray you in the end. There were no doubt other reasons. He knew that if the UK joined Europe, this would weaken France's influence, one that had increased as the result of a partnership with West Germany under Konrad Adenauer.

De Gaulle was conscious of the ties between UK and U.S. The UK had allied with the U.S. in 1957 in opposing the French plan for a Force de Frappe, a strike force which was a mix of air, sea, and land based nuclear weapons, and French nuclear ambitions. Macmillan, the last PM to have served in army in World War I, an advocate of decolonization, opted in 1970 to join the U.S. Skybolt Missile project which was cancelled a short time later, permitted U.S. Navy in 1961 to use a ballistic missile submarine base at Holy Loch, Scotland, and bought Polaris missiles.

President Macron acknowledged he has been portrayed as the hard man, the toughest in the Brexit negotiations, prepared to block proposals. Renegotiations was not an option for the EU. He was the only person opposing a longer Brexit extension if

necessary. He held that deadlock in the negotiations was due to Britain, not the EU. In the negotiations, he had heard only a lot of noise without a lot of serious discussion.

In a manner reminiscent of de Gaulle, Macron declared that the UK's special relationship with the U.S. would come at the "cost of a historic vassalization" as the U.S. would not compensate for the cost of Brexit. The British people did not vote for the country to become a "subsidiary of President Trump." They may become the junior partner of the U.S.

Macron remarked that if no concrete solution could be found it would be UK's responsibility. It would mean that the problem is deeper, more political, a British political problem. Then, there will be a political choice to be made by the British PM, it won't fall to us.

The entire world will breathe a sigh of relief if the Brexit issue is removed from the political agenda. Divorce in politics, as in real life, is always a poignant experience. The French attitude is no way to say goodbye. For Boris Johnson, the question is, irrespective of the vote in the House of Commons on October 19, what is there to say and how will he pull through.