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Brexit – it's all Greek to me!

Just like Syriza during the Greek crisis, Brexit's propogandists are promising far more than they can deliver

The current Brexit negotiations resemble the walk on the Grexit tightrope in 2015. The clumsy way in which the Greek government under Alexis Tsipras and his then finance minister Yanis Varoufakis negotiated the third bailout programme bears many similarities to today's haggling between London and Brussels.

The Leave campaign served voters a heady brew of foggy ideas such as 'taking back control' and outright fantasies, including predictions British fishermen would gain complete control of the island's waters, and the now infamous promise to give an extra 350 million pounds a week to the NHS.

The blueprint of such positions belongs to Tsipras and Varoufakis. They wanted to end the bailout policies once and for all, and they even promised to abolish all related laws in a single day. Similarly, the UK's EU withdrawal bill aims to repeal the precedence of EU law over the UK parliament in one fell swoop. Prime Minister Theresa May's own Conservative MPs say the bill grants 'Henry VIII powers' that would allow ministers to make huge legislative changes with minimal scrutiny from parliament. A potential Tory rebellion has forced her to delay a discussion of the bill at committee level.

Syriza, Tsipras' party of left-wing populists, also promised heaven and earth to the austerity-plagued Greek public, but gave no indication of how they would finance and implement their vast social programme. Their 'proud negotiation', driven mostly by Varoufakis, failed pathetically and led Greece into its third and possibly harshest austerity programme since 2010.

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The whole process was capped by a surreal referendum, where Greeks voted with a more than 60 per cent majority against the latest negotiation proposal. Tsipras simply ignored

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the result. In the following weeks, he ditched the most extremist parts of his party, fired Varoufakis, and won the general elections in September 2015 with nearly the same majority as in January 2015. He has governed happily ever after.

In the Greek example, we see some striking similarities with the current Brexit negotiations.

Lumbering lefties and blundering Brexiteers

First off there's the lack of strategy. Tsipras and co knew exactly what they did *not* want politically. But they couldn't offer anything positive its place. Likewise, the Tory Party appears to have no strategy and is riven by infighting over what the best kind of Brexit would look like. It means Brussels is loath to take any commitments the Brits make seriously, given that disagreements within the Tory party could lead to a new government or even snap elections.

Secondly, both the Greeks and the Brits have displayed an astonishing lack of personal and institutional preparedness. By 2015, the newly-elected Greek government had failed to established meaningful contacts in Europe outside of their leftist bubble, and found themselves needing to build networks in the midst of the most intense negotiations. They also had a deep mistrust of their own civil service and there was little communication between Tsipras' government and the previous administration. Thanks to his mulish attitude, Varoufakis managed for the first time to unite all the other European states in their rejection of the Greek proposals. He was prone to give lengthy macroeconomic lectures to his fellow ministers, who expected realistic proposals in the Eurogroup, not indoctrination from a newcomer.

Thankfully, the UK is far better equipped in this regard: civil servants are trusted to do their job and, since the next elections aren't due to take place until 2022, political expertise won't be lost in a handover of power. However, British negotiators need to develop a better understanding of the differing priorities of EU member states and institutions when it comes to Brexit. For example, whereas the Visegrad countries are likely to emphasise security cooperation and the rights of their own citizens living in the UK, nations such as Spain are more concerned about their trading relationship.

Thirdly, the wild promises of both Syriza and the Brexiteers have led to unrealistic expectations on the part of the electorate. Thanks to Syriza's rhetoric, many ordinary Greeks expected their politicians to come up with a new deal that ended austerity and focused on investment. And whilst Tsipras' party included some pragmatists, its more extreme left wing silently hoped for the end of Greece's EU membership and an ensuing socialist revolution. Some of Tsipras' more outlandish proposals – including writing off Greece's debt completely, and the payment of World War II reparations by Germany – were aimed at satisfying this small group that was nonetheless necessary to maintain the government majority.

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Mirroring this approach are those Brexit hardliners who insist you can 'have your cake, eat it, and let EU pay for it'. The British government itself has fed into these kind of expectations by presenting technological solutions to a customs regime that are more science fiction than realistic policy. Their proposal – an automatic monitoring system of incoming and outcoming goods aimed at limiting delays at the border – has not yet been invented. Many who voted Leave have high hopes of what Brexit might mean for Britain: complete independence from pesky 'Brussels bureaucrats', an enhanced international role for a restored 'Global Britain', and increased trade with 'friends old and new' – not least the UK's former colonies. Those expectations will come to haunt future governments, when the more mundane reality of job losses, rising prices and a lack of foreign investment becomes clear.

An ideological smokescreen

International negotiations on the Greek bailout followed an opaque logic that often obscured who was calling the shots. The institutional framework of the IMF and the Commission has acted as a smokescreen for decisions that bear deeply rooted ideological positions, be it on the liberalisation of the labour market or the privatisation of water suppliers. The Greek idea of shortcutting these negotiations by directly engaging with Berlin and Paris sometimes backfired, since it provoked resistance from the European institutions.

Here again London seems to be following in Athens' footsteps.

Negotiating with the Commission and 27 other member states is tricky for a single country, and requires diplomatic mastery. Of course, capitals like Berlin and Paris play an important role in the final stages of the negotiation. However, trying to sidestep the Commission by engaging directly with Europe's capitals behind closed doors could prove fatal. France and Germany's recent lobbying for a tougher stance on conditions surrounding Britain's withdrawal indicates the UK may be saved from this trap.

The Greek case shows vividly what the consequences of repeating these failures could be: Tsipras' 'proud negotiation' yielded very mixed results. He lost a good deal of trust on the part of fellow Europeans. Greece was driven further into recession and the economic losses of those six months amounted to some € 80bn, according to the Bank of Greece. Greek citizens had to endure closed banks, capital controls and a summer of fear, unsure whether they would wake up in the Eurozone the next day or not.

Unfortunately, the current negotiations between London and the EU are moving in a similar direction to those of Greece. Presented with the practical difficulties the Brexit negotiations pose for the current government, the most vocal Brexiteers are reaching for the 'Baldrick-principle'. Just like Blackadder's sidekick in the BBC comedy series, the pro-Brexit Tories' 'cunning plan' will lead to nowhere. 'Brexit means Brexit' is the kind of circular, empty rhetoric intended to mask the government's cluelessness. Repeating it ad nauseam in pompous speeches at home or in Florence does not help to clarify the situation. What does seem clear is that the Brits' current stance will lead to a result that benefits neither the UK nor the European Union in the long term.

The question for the UK is simple. Will London be a Baldrick to Brussels, always keeping one eye on the domestic arena and hoping to gain ground there? Or will the British government learn from Greece's mistakes and adopt a more responsible approach, with the common aim of establishing viable relations between the UK and its partners after Brexit? Cunning or otherwise, that plan would at least show the kind of pragmatism for which the British were once famed.



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