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Leaving Europe

With his EU citizenship ending, it's not the passport Paul Mason worries about. It's the values it was supposed to represent

Read this article in German or Russian.

Since 2016 there's been a question in the back of my mind: which is the last European city I will ever visit as an EU citizen? Now I know the answer: I've just come back from Bonn, the city of Beethoven, Deutsche Post and large parts of the German civil service.

It's a quiet place now the government has gone back to Berlin. The university's presence is everywhere: staff and students make up close to 15 per cent of the population. Its biggest commercial theatre is currently producing Feydeau's farce A Flea in her Ear; its opera house is showing a version of Beethoven's Fidelio, themed around the plight of Turkish political prisoners; its main art cinema is showing Jessica Haussner's Little Joe.

I found the food good, the beer excellent and the conversation — conducted in perfect English for my benefit — sparkling.

And that's what we British are leaving behind — the ability to take a one-hour flight and trade, after minimal procedure, with the most stable and successful economy in the northern hemisphere and the most educated 500 million people on the planet.

Because a minority of English voters — who have never heard of Feydeau and will never see Fidelio — want out of Europe, the next time I visit the EU it will be through the channel marked 'other nationalities'. Given the crushing nature of the Conservative victory in the UK election in December, I can be equally sure that there will be no British return to Europe's institutions in my lifetime.

Uncomfortable answer

What the politics professors and the think-tankers from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung wanted to know from me was why did Labour lose so badly? The uncomfortable answer is because we were trying to defend this thing you are part of: our country's membership of a stable multilateral institution, the ideals that lie behind a cross-border European culture and the legacy of the enlightenment — a rules-based order built on rationality and respect for expertise.

I've also been wondering how I shall feel about leaving the EU. I was never a fan of its institutions: the dead space between national sovereignty and supranational sovereignty became a playground for corporate interests. The bureaucratic mindset I encountered as a journalist operating in Brussels during the eurozone crisis, from the commission downwards, left me thinking I would rather be dealing with a sovereign state under more democratic control.

At its worst, during the crisis and the enforced austerity which followed, the EU looked like it could kill the ideal of Europe.

But now the UK is leaving, on 31 January 2020, the trajectory is pretty clear. We have a de facto governing coalition of the right and the far-right, with a five-year parliamentary majority and venal media which will not hold it to account. The rule of law will come under strain. Given the huge mandate for Scottish nationalism, it's likely that the UK will fragment. And the blame game will not stop.

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'Brexit' alone will deliver little joy to the joyless people who voted Tory on December 12th. So they will need more — more racism, more xenophobia, more blame heaped on Brussels as it refuses to bend to the hubristic demands of the Conservative leader and prime minister, Boris Johnson.

But while the Brexit negotiations are just beginning, and the Brexit crisis may reach its height towards the end of 2020, it's time to draw a balance sheet — of the emotions and the politics of the years since the fateful 2016 referendum launched by Johnson's predecessor but one, David Cameron.

My overwhelming emotion is regret. Not at the institutional change, but at the squandered opportunity Britain's now to be terminated

membership of the EU represents.

No grand strategy

To the people who look back on these events in 50 years' time, the problem will be pretty clear: at no stage of the European project, after the UK joined in 1973, did anyone develop a serious 'grand strategy' for the EU. There was an economic model — first Keynesianism and then the social market. There was a brainless rush to absorb as much of eastern Europe as possible. There was the eurozone — on which judgement still has to be reserved, given its fiscal fragility.

But neither the national elites nor the transnational bureaucracy ever conceived an overarching strategy which merited the adjective 'grand', in the sense that the MIT professor Barry Posen defines it—'a nation-state's theory about how to produce security for itself'. Instead, the elites of Europe built a single currency, a single market and some cross-border institutions, none of which has proved robust in the face of global economic crisis.

Because they were never willing to create a single economy for Europe, let alone a real polity, at the first major structural crisis the European elites have managed to lose an economy worth USD 2.6 trillion a year, and in the process unleash a loose cannon on to the deck of the global system. Once the free-trade agreement is negotiated and the internal battles of the Tory party exhausted, Britain could very easily become an unpredictable wrecking ball in the global system.

A new British elite will coalesce, around speculative finance and transatlantic trade. And the next generation of privileged young people will look more to Washington and Singapore than to cities such as Madrid, Paris and Berlin.

'Global Britain'

I'm going to explore the implications of this new fact, or what the Tories have labelled 'global Britain' — how its new priorities will impact on Europe and on the bigger geo-strategic power-play among Russia, China and the United States.

For now, I'll answer the question I posed above: how do I feel? Feelings are important because, when replicated on a mass scale, they can transform continents.

The most immediate sense of loss is not over the single market or freedom of movement, but over the possibility of co-ordinated action against climate change. Labour's Green New Deal proposal was genuinely radical, and those of us who fought for it knew we were doing so against the productivist bias of many of the Labour-supporting unions. By contrast, the European Commission's blueprint, published in December 2019, is weak. It sees the market and the private sector as the means to achieve zero net carbon by 2050, and as a result has no answers to what we do when—inevitably—the market and the private sector fail.

One only has to go to Germany to see how advanced British social democracy was on the climate issue, compared with a party like the SPD, which remains existentially deferential to the coal and automobile industries.

So in the month when my European citizenship ends, it's not the passport I worry about. It's the values the passport was supposed to represent.

But the strategic sense of loss I feel is cultural. Right now, the socially liberal stratum of every European country feels under threat. We're supposed to apologise for participating in, and defending, the enlightenment culture born in the universities and conservatoires of cities such as Bonn. The cost of failing to connect with increasingly nativist and xenophobic voters was well demonstrated by Labour's fiasco in December.

Transnational culture

But if the lesson we (in Britain) draw is to disconnect from transnational European culture, it will be fatal. This transnational culture barely existed in the 1970s, when I made my first ever trip outside the UK (to Alicante!). Its creation, via Interrail, Erasmus, the European Champions' League, cheap flights, electronic dance music, porn, fashion and — yes — the Eurovision song contest, is probably the biggest and least understood cultural event in my lifetime.

There's not even an adequate word for it. But the fact is that the 21 year-olds in Bonn with their perfect English, the young journalists I met in Ferrara at its annual journalism festival and the hip bohemians of Vilnius and Dublin read the same books, watch the same kind of films, eat the same fusion of European and Asian food and increasingly dress the same way.

Though it took 400 years, and detoured through colonialism, nationalism, fascism, Stalinism and two world wars, this is the ultimate

cultural legacy of the enlightenment. Bonn's most famous son did not set the words Alle Menschen werden Brüder to music on a whim.

But now the enlightenment's values are under threat everywhere: from the American alt-right, whose two big enemies are professional media and peer-reviewed research, from evangelical Christianity, and from the mass folk religion of fatalism, which teaches young people that only chance (a talent show, lottery or Instagram celebrity) is a viable route to wealth and happiness. And of course from the anti-humanist left itself, under the banner of postmodernism.

So in the month when my European citizenship ends, it's not the passport I worry about. It's the values the passport was supposed to represent. Brexit may turn out to be just one moment in the disintegration of a multilateral order: if so that can be survived, as long as we defend science, rationality, climate justice and the rule of law.

Doing so, however, means deprioritising some things the left cares deeply about. This, unfortunately, may be harder than we expected.

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Paul Mason
London

Paul Mason is a British author and radio personality. In 2015 he published his book *PostCapitalism: A Guide to our Future* (Allen Lane).