What happened to British pragmatism?

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I was wrong. Three years ago I was convinced that the Brexit referendum would deliver a *Remain* vote. I trusted in the legendary British pragmatism. To me, an aversion to dogmatism, ideology, fanciful emotions and romanticist visions was not only a distinctive feature of Anglo-American philosophy and economics but also an integral part of British politics.

Recent political history seemed to prove my point: Tony Blair's pragmatic establishment of "New Labour" in 1997 as a renunciation of "outdated ideology; what counts is what works" – an attitude later followed by David Cameron's "Compassionate Conservatism"; the 2014 Scottish independence referendum in which economic realism in the end trumped nationalist sentiment; and above all the inherently pragmatic attitude of all post-war UK governments towards Europe.

David Cameron summed up the latter in his Bloomberg speech in 2013 when he officially announced his intention to hold a Brexit referendum: "We come to the European Union with a frame of mind that is more practical than emotional. For us, the European Union is a means to an end - prosperity, stability, the anchor of freedom and democracy both within Europe and beyond her shores - not an end in itself".

What happened during the Brexit referendum campaign and after the vote to leave delivered serious blows to my belief in British pragmatism.

→   David Cameron's pragmatic and potentially substantial pre-referendum EU-reform deal, which allowed for some progress in terms of flexibility, subsidiarity and competitiveness in the EU, was largely dismissed as an insufficient compromise by a large majority of British media and political zealots in all parties.

→   The referendum campaign was powered by emotions, not the cost-benefit calculations the "nation of shopkeepers" was traditionally thought to employ. The electorate was confronted with "project fear" on the Remain side and "irrational exuberance" on the Leave side. The Brexit argument finally won with an undeliverable promise to "take back control" (full sovereignty) without losing access to EU and world markets, whilst at the same time saving £350 million a week to be spent on the NHS.

→   The referendum result even took leave campaigners by surprise. And both before and after the referendum was held, there was no agreed view of what Brexit could possibly mean. After all, the 52% only demanded the UK to leave the EU. They were not asked, and thus did not demand to leave the single market, or the customs union, or Euratom, or many other forms of economic and political cooperation, many of which the EU also offers to non-EU members (e.g. Norway, Switzerland, Turkey). And there was hardly any debate on the consequences any form of Brexit could have for the Good Friday Agreement between Ireland and hern Ireland.

At the time of writing (April 7, 2019) it is still not clear what Brexit could mean, nor when (and even if) it would actually happen. It has become clear, however, that the UK has lost its sense of pragmatism and wasted precious time – along

with domestic and inward investment and diplomatic standing – by chasing unicorns, appeasing rebels in party and government ... whilst running down the clock with no effect.

After invoking the Art. 50 divorce procedure under European law without a pragmatic, internally agreed and deliverable negotiation strategy; after miscalculated new elections that produced anything but a "strong and stable" government; after the resignations of an unprecedented number of cabinet ministers (including those in charge of Brexit deals they themselves negotiated with the EU); and after multiple votes on the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement, but also on alternatives to it in the House Commons, which only delivered a multiple "no" to the deal, "no" to alternative deals and "no" to no deal, it has become impossible to answer "yes" to the question: "is British pragmatism still alive?"

There are good (and some even, in a way, pragmatic) reasons for this predicament: there simply are no Brexit "solutions" that would satisfy the ambitions and daydreams of Brexiteers and at the same time acquiesce the mostly justified fears of the Remainers.

Theresa May decided to interpret Brexit in line with "hard" Brexiteers in her own party and government, which created her "red lines": that Brexit means that the UK would have to leave the Single Market (and thus also the European Economic Area), the Common Commercial Policy, the Customs Union, and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. At the same time, it was assumed that the UK could be able to retain pretty much the same economic benefits as before and regain some extra political benefits from independence.

The Article 50 notification in March 2017 was sent prematurely, in an attempt to please political and media supporters. The UK's red lines strangled any possible options such as bespoke deals regarding single market and customs union participation.

On the EU-27 side, not only had there been the same negotiators throughout the process, but also the same unified strategy. Already in December 2016, the EU had formulated a negotiating strategy and priority list, which they have kept to ever since. All the hopes on the UK side that the EU would soon be divided and that, in the end, German carmakers would urge Angela Merkel to urge Michel Barnier to offer the most generous terms were utterly refuted. Instead, the EU offered pragmatic solutions for a legally binding withdrawal agreement (especially on citizens' rights, outstanding payments and the Irish border) that would allow for a flexible implementation period, which would avoid economic frictions after Brexit and give time for the UK to make up its mind on the future relationship with the UK. For the latter, EU negotiator Barnier soon produced this chart:
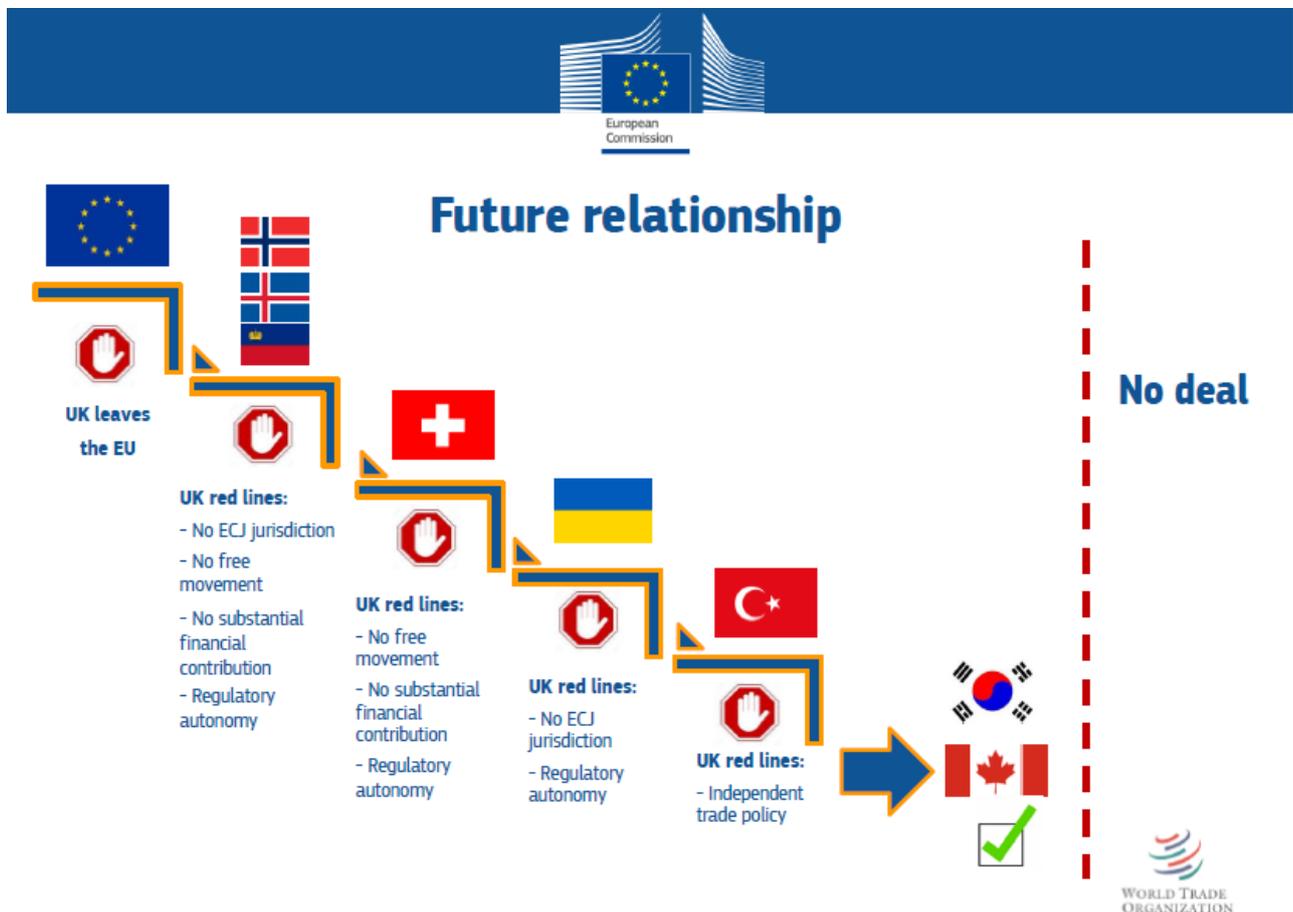
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