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Britain and EU Set for Ugly Divorce

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Divorces are never easy nor pleasant, and Britain's bust-up with the European Union is no different. Recriminations, anger, sadness – and the inevitable wrangling over separation terms can be expected to grind on and on. Who gets what, how much and when? But the British-EU

divorce looks set to be particularly nasty, and messy, because of certain irreconcilable differences.

This week saw the retiring British Prime Minister David Cameron attending his «last ever summit» with EU leaders at the European Council in Brussels. Cameron was not invited to the second day of the summit which was held by the remaining 27 member states – a poignant sign that the reality of the so-called Brexit is dawning.

Britain wants a gradual divorce, perhaps requiring two years or more for the «alimony» to get resolved. Whereas the other EU members want to show the United Kingdom the door – and quickly too.

Germany, France and Italy are telling Britain to get out promptly without further ado. The pushy tone is echoed by European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and European Council President Donald Tusk.

For the EU leaders, Britain's rejection of the bloc's membership after 43 years of «marriage» with its national referendum last week came as a body blow. Continental Europe has been jilted and a feeling of forlorn is understandable. German Chancellor Angela Merkel voiced the feelings of other leaders when she spoke of her sadness about the parting of ways.

But, then, rubbing salt into European wounds comes the British announcement that it is not seeking a «quickie divorce» – but rather would like to take its time in assessing the exact terms of the historic departure. Terms such as what kind of access to the EU single market can post-Brexit Britain expect; and what of travel permits for British citizens going to mainland Europe.

In Brussels – five days after the referendum – David Cameron reiterated his intention of not triggering Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, which is the necessary legal mechanism for Britain to formally begin the process of leaving the EU.

The outgoing Conservative Party leader had campaigned for Britain to remain a member of the EU. Cameron promptly handed in his resignation notice last Friday on the morning of the referendum result declaring a 52 per cent decisive vote for Britain to leave. He said that his successor, as prime minister, should be the one to sign Article 50, and to hence oversee the terms of the Brexit. But that could be three months away when the Conservative Party holds its annual conference in October.

Britain, which joined the then six-member European Economic Community back in 1973, is the only nation to have ever walked away from the bloc. So the turmoil of the Brexit is partly due to the fact that this is uncharted territory, politically, legally and economically. Still, the process of separation under Article 50 of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty is solely at the behest of the member wishing to quit the EU. Brussels and the other EU members cannot do that for Britain.

On that score Britain seems to have the upper hand. London can, legally speaking, spin out the exit process.

Boris Johnson, the former mayor of London and a contender to take over from Cameron as Conservative Party leader and prime minister, has also said that he is in «*no hurry to sign Article 50*». Johnson recommends negotiating the right package of separation terms with Brussels – which has the ominous sound of a glacially slow game of British cricket.

This leisurely attitude towards Brexit has been intimidated by other senior Tory party members, including the Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond and Home Secretary Theresa May, who is also tipped as a likely successor to Cameron.

But this British dalliance over divorce is rankling its former partners in the EU, who are growing impatient, even angry, for a clean, swift break.

Martin Schulz, the German head of the European Parliament said this week – again – that Britain must trigger the Brexit «immediately». This urgency to cut the ties with Britain is shared by French President Francois Hollande and Italy's premier Matteo Renzi. And they seemed to have prevailed on Germany's Angela Merkel. Initially, Merkel expressed «*understanding*» about Britain's need to «take its time».

But the German Chancellor's tone reportedly sharpened after she met with Hollande and Renzi in Berlin on Monday. Merkel subsequently told the Bundestag – to resounding applause – that Britain would not be allowed to «cherry-pick» its way out of the EU and for those who «*leave the European family*» out means out.

What the EU leaders are perplexed by is the «domino effect» from Britain's departure. The Brexit has emboldened many other anti-EU parties and sentiments across Europe, including within stalwart members, Germany, France and Italy. French National Front leader Marine Le Pen has hailed the Brexit as heralding the «People's Spring» of revolt against the EU administration and its project of European integration.

Several EU states are facing elections over the next year. The apprehension among incumbent governments is that anti-EU parties, such as Le Pen's National Front and Alternative for Germany, will make even further electoral gains than they already have in recent years. The European political opposition parties – tapping into widespread public anger over unemployment, economic austerity, immigration, kowtowing to Washington's anti-Russia agenda – may even win control of government power in key capitals.

The longer that Britain's exit from the EU drags on, the more destabilizing the issue of «Euroscepticism» becomes. And if Britain is seen to grasp to many favorable separation terms, as would likely happen over a protracted period, then that too could spur other anti-EU parties to follow suit.

EU leaders are keen to quickly move beyond the breakdown with Britain in order to tend to the needs of the remaining 27 members. They are speaking almost in protective tones, as if referring to a broken family whose members have been traumatized by an errant partner.

Resentment towards Britain is seething among certain EU members for having plunged «the family» into crisis.

In an article headlined «German leaders furious at UK's reluctance to invoke Article 50», the British Independent newspaper reports: «*The French finance minister, Michel Sapin, said the French government agrees with the Germans that the sooner the UK leaves, the better. 'France, like Germany, thinks that Britain voted for Brexit, and Brexit should be put in place starting now'*».

The paper goes on to quote «*one well-placed German source*» as saying: «*The political parties, the political leaders, the commentators and a big, big majority of the people want this process to start yesterday. They are absolutely determined – 'you decided to go, now get out'. They are absolutely pissed about Cameron. They see him as egocentric and ego manic. He tried to play a poker game, and lost. The issue wasn't about the EU, it was to save his butt. It was mismanaged and not very clever*».

To many within the Brussels establishment and European governments, Britain is viewed as having caused a massive rupture in the EU over its own restless domestic affairs, in particular how Cameron's Conservative Party has for decades been internally split over the concept of the EU, as well as trying to thwart the electoral challenge from the more rightwing United Kingdom Independence Party, led by Nigel Farage.

Now that Britain has filed for divorce it appears to be taking its own sweet time about collecting its belongings. And there is more than a sneaking feeling that London knows that the longer it can wrangle its way out the door then the better the terms of separation it can obtain.

Adding to the fury of the spurned EU partners is that this British tardiness is only further riling up the malcontents left behind, with the danger that the whole household might erupt in chaos.

Thus, Britain's cricket-like slow pace will be met increasingly with blistering demands from mainland Europe for it to «get out». The contradictory concerns will harden even more. And a lot of shouting and wailing can be expected as this divorce turns ugly.