

A hard Brexit means the Europe question will live on in the UK

*A Brexit deal is now in place, so are the implications of a clean break with the EU that are becoming clearer. This hard Brexit means the Europe question will live on in the UK, writes **Michael Cottakis** (89 Initiative).*

We now have a Brexit deal. It is a deal which was met with a sigh of relief by an exhausted public – the closing chapter in the Brexit saga. Some even cheered. Avoiding a No Deal outcome is clearly a good thing. But the public must be under no illusion about this paper-thin free-trade agreement. In truth, it reflects perhaps the biggest act of economic protectionism in the long history of these islands.

The 52-48% referendum result represented a small preference for Leave. Democratic logic pointed to a moderate Brexit with the UK leaving the EU, but retaining with it a close economic and security relationship – perhaps in the Single Market or customs union. Unfortunately, extremists on both sides co-opted the debate, robbing moderates of air time and column inches. Tory Leavers, enduringly terrified of a Faragist resurgence, sought to out-do each other in elaborating an ever-purer vision of sovereignty. In consternation, many Remainers, promising initially to abide by the result began to openly advocate a second referendum; and the cancelling of Brexit altogether.

The adults in the room were few. Rory Stewart, David Gauke, Ken Clarke and others tried to speak for the middle ground. Their reward was expulsion from the Conservative Party. The country organised itself into stark camps: either Hard Brexit or none at all. For a period, Brexit ripped apart the long tradition of British centrism and did away with the only possible compromise: a soft Brexit.



Photograph by Clem Rutter, Rochester, Kent.

The implications of this failure are abject. These will generally be discussed in economic terms. But they are perhaps best understood when considering the future of a divided society in the UK, and its Europe question at large. Leavers often use the example of Switzerland, to demonstrate how the UK's pro-European movement might ebb away as the new reality becomes normal. In their referendum of 1992, the Swiss voted by an even slimmer majority (50.3-49.7%) to reject accession to the EU. In the intervening years, national support for EU membership has decreased – to 13% according to recent polling.

Yet the comparison is illusory. Following its EU referendum, Switzerland negotiated a set of bespoke arrangements, offering Single Market access in its most important sectors. Indeed, the country has since considerably increased its volume of EU trade. Importantly, never an EU member, it has not been able to look back nostalgically on membership and think: 'what might have been'. Because it opted for close economic ties – particularly in its finance and banking sector – Switzerland has done fine outside the EU. Most Swiss argue that, given the many economic benefits, a close EU relationship is worth the minor concessions in sovereignty. The same Leavers may justly be reminded that a more recent referendum on whether to claw back sovereignty from the EU produced a resounding No vote.

Perhaps the lesson from Switzerland is on the role a softer Brexit might have played. With something to satisfy both sides, and an economy performing well, there would have been little reason for the British public to support re-accession, or another go at a referendum. Yet scanning the terrain on the eve of Brexit, the conditions still exist for both – at least at some stage. For the country is too divided, and the lack of compromise too painful for Brexit's losers. The question of Europe has not been put to bed.

If 'Brexit 'regret' has been something of a 'drip', it will likely become a flood in the cold light of day. Many Conservative Leavers will not say it, but may think: was this all worth it? Remainers, sore in defeat and aghast at Brexit's end-state will not move gently into the sunset. In the wake of these currents, it might only require a European olive branch – a concession, a new security alliance, or a reform of the EU itself – to put the relationship back on the agenda. **The losers of Brexit are the British public at large. A generation of younger Remainers will watch with interest.**

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.