

‘Bloody difficult’ Britain has already blown its chances of a good deal from the EU27



*The run-up to the Brexit negotiations has been disastrous for the UK, writes former negotiator **Steve Bullock**. It has hectored and insulted the EU27’s intelligence and undermined its own credibility. The chances of securing a good deal in the time left are minimal: approaching extremely complex negotiations, Britain chose to be ‘bloody difficult’.*

Being “tough” and being “difficult” are not the same thing. Being tough can work, but only if deployed sparingly at strategic points in negotiations. Being difficult for difficult’s sake never works. It simply breaks trust and creates resentment leading to a justifiable unwillingness in partners to compromise.

Successful negotiation in the EU is not, contrary to popular belief, about thumping the table and demanding you get everything you want for nothing in return. It’s also not about undermining your opposite numbers (oppos in Brussels-speak), or insulting their intelligence by making outlandish claims. Yet, in preparing for Brexit negotiations, the UK government has done all of these things with, it seems, gusto and pride.

Trust is key to a successful negotiation. Both sides must know that the other is negotiating in good faith. Both may know that walking away is an option in extremis, but openly threatening this undermines trust that a solution is being sought. Any compromises or concessions require trust and good faith.



The EU27 have been dismayed at Britain’s position. Vice-President of the European Council Federica Mogherini and German Chancellor Angela Merkel at a Council meeting in June 2017. Photo: [European Council](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-ND 2.0 licence](#)

Understanding your oppos is essential. Each has a complex set of constraints and expectations from their own side. Understanding their position allows you to identify solutions that satisfy their concerns and meet your objectives. If you have put yourself in the position that your overall line is fundamentally incompatible with that of your oppos, you have already lost.

An oppos’ issue with one of your lines may be less fundamental than it looks. You should be guiding your oppos towards being able to support, or at least not block, something as close to your preferred outcome as possible. The process is a long, complex one, and actions at any point will not be forgotten later.

Positions should be clearly prioritised, with built-in fallback positions. Everyone wants their priority to be your number one, must be got, can’t be traded priority, but they simply can’t all be. Many will have to be traded, and you should know which can be and for what.

Flexibility must be built into your position from the start. Not everything can be a red line. Oppos respect genuine red lines – they have them too. Claiming that every point is a red line though is crying wolf.

The pre-negotiation phase has been a disaster for the UK. The UK government first tried to divide the EU27, and then, when that didn’t work, set about deliberately breeding resentment and mistrust. The balance of power is such that the EU27 hold almost all the cards, but the government seems in a state of denial about this. Its Cabinet ministers hector, smeared and threatened the very people they are asking for help and concessions from.

The EU27’s carefully drafted position papers synthesise a multitude of opening positions from 27 governments, the European Parliament, and the Commission. While these papers do not represent a final offer, they equally do not represent a first go at a vague wish list. The UK government knows this. Yet its approach has been to pretend that the EU27’s positions were mere posturing, particularly over the sequencing of negotiations (which the UK caved in on in the first hours of negotiations), citizens’ rights and the Four Freedoms. This was absurd and served to make UK look like it was not a serious negotiator.

Then came the ill-fated “No Deal Better than Bad Deal” rhetoric. This had a disastrous effect on the UK’s credibility, largely because it is demonstrably untrue. **Of course the EU27 does not want the UK to walk away with no deal. It would cost them dearly, but they will deal with it if they must.** The EU itself and its core principles are more important. Besides, everyone knows that no deal would cost the UK an order of magnitude more than the EU27, so this strategy served only to reduce trust.

The UK government has acted as if the EU27 countries are yet to discover the internet, and don’t have access to UK news. The EU27, though, knows the UK has backed itself into a corner on so many issues that its positions are fundamentally incompatible with the positive outcomes it has said it will get. The EU27 knows that this government will now find it politically impossible to go back with a big exit bill, or accept freedom of movement, or European Court of Justice jurisdiction over anything, no matter what it gets in return.

Ruling out these things publicly, instead of explaining and managing expectations at home, shows the UK government is either willing to lie to its people or genuinely ignorant of the realities. This weakens any sympathetic voices for the UK.

Finally, it really helps to have the arguments, facts and moral high ground on your side in negotiations. The UK has showed again and again that it has none of these. The unwillingness to guarantee citizens’ rights was bad, but the threat to bargain over security cooperation was a moment of appalling moral weakness.

The EU27’s leaders very much want a deal, but the government’s approach has made any desire to look for solutions that suit the UK evaporate. Why bother when they don’t appear to want a deal anyway? Why give concessions when the UK’s constraints are entirely of its own making?

In my view, the chances of this government getting any deal, let alone a good one, in only 21 months, are minimal. But I think it knows this. The Chancellor Philip Hammond, a lone moderate, pleaded for a transitional deal lasting up to four years. **The level of complexity is too much for**

the UK’s Brexit negotiators, their preparations too poor, and the messaging too self-defeating.

I can therefore only conclude that this government’s plan is to walk out of negotiations, which will, of course, be a catastrophe for the UK. And all for want of a little humility, trust, honesty, organisation and understanding. But the government just couldn’t help itself, could it? The negotiators had to be bloody difficult.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE. It is based on a Twitter thread originally [posted here](#). This was jointly published with the [New Statesman](#) and [The UK in a Changing Europe](#).

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