

# Macron's Brexit swansong is about to unfold

At a solemn ceremony at the Panthéon to mark the 150th anniversary of the (re-)birth of the Republic, president Macron chose a 59-year-old anti-Brexit British expatriate to be one of five newly naturalised French citizens emblematic of what it means to become French. Macron does nothing without gauging its historical and political theatre. Coming just days before the eighth and final round of Brexit negotiations, here was Macron thumbing his nose at Britain and signalling his intention to return to the Brexit arena. What will this mean for the Brexit negotiations?

First it will see Michel Barnier increasingly sidelined. Barnier is, after all, a mere EU functionary whose brief was drafted before Covid and which he has very legalistically stuck to. Unsurprisingly, when Barnier was asked this week on French radio about this prospect he gave the functionary's stock response: 'I negotiate in the name of the 27 heads of state and government, who have confidence in me.'

But in Macron's eyes, Barnier's work is all but done. And Macron is ruthless when it comes to achieving his political aims. Barnier has directly experienced this when the Frenchman stood to replace Jean-Claude Juncker as president of the European Commission, but was sharply pushed aside by Macron in the greater interests of Franco-German harmony.

Second, Macron will intensify backroom negotiations with EU leaders to determine where concessions can be made and where not. To oversimplify, his strategy will proceed thus. He will begin with Germany, moving on to the 'southern' EU states like Italy and Spain who will clearly benefit most from Macron's lead on debt mutualisation. They are beholden to him and remain so, as debt mutualisation negotiations are not finalised, particularly on the thorny question of paying down the common debt.

Only then will he turn to the 'northern states'. Here he will have a trickier game to play, because the likes of the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, Finland are by tradition more sympathetic to London and tend to trade more with the UK. As for

convincing the central and eastern European states, Macron will have his toughest job, for here he is not liked for his lesson-giving and programme for greater EU integration on his terms.

Third, simply put, Britain's diplomatic strategy will be to work the European chancelleries in reverse order to France's. But key 'swing' states for London (and Paris) will be the Netherlands and Germany. The former because in the EU they have assumed Britain's old role of saying 'No' to largely French deeper integration reforms. Macron - in typical fashion - irritated the Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte in the intense debt mutualisation negotiations in June, casting his country as the stingy opponents of EU solidarity and even portraying Rutte as David Cameron for his 'obstructionist' position vis a vis the EU. Given Dutch historical sympathy to Britain and Euroscepticism, there is mileage here for British diplomacy.

What then of Germany? Franco-German solidarity notwithstanding, Berlin cannot be counted on to toe the hard Macron line in squeezing Britain. Germany's position in relation to France and Britain is highly ambiguous and sensitive. The late European historian Tony Judt perfectly - yet cruelly - encapsulated the Franco-German post-war relationship as based on the principle, 'You pretend not to be powerful, and we pretend not to notice that you are'. And for obvious historical reasons of a very different order, the German-British relationship is particularly sensitive for Germany. Angela Merkel will not wish to sour her successful chancellorship by bequeathing sharply antagonistic relations with Great Britain to her successors.

Finally, what will Macron's next step be after the backroom diplomacy? It is instructive to note that the second recently naturalised French citizen Macron chose to highlight at the Panthéon was Lebanese. The French president has been directly and unabashedly interventionist in Lebanese politics of late even dictating the date, terms and programme of a future government of this otherwise independent state.

On past form, Macron will not be able to restrain himself from some grandiloquent, historically themed, warning to the UK that she must accept the EU's terms. That will probably come around 15 October and the European Council summit. But this will be largely Macronian theatre.

For in reality, much points to Macron, if not French diplomacy, having almost come to accept that this time Britain is serious about not being 'a vassal state' of the EU. It is noteworthy that *Le Monde* – still occasionally the mouthpiece of the French executive – carried two articles setting out with uncustomary fair-mindedness, Boris Johnson's explanation for the 15 October deadline, as well as David Frost's salient points from his interview in the *Mail on Sunday* insisting on Britain's post-Brexit sovereign status. That interview will have connected with Macron for its Gaullist overtones and principles that the French president himself highlighted in London on 18 June to celebrate the General's famous resistance speech.

It is not only Boris Johnson who wishes 'to move on' from Brexit. In November, president Macron will return to London for the tenth anniversary of the Lancaster House treaties that confirmed and deepened already close Franco-British foreign and security cooperation. This is one tangible reason why Macron cannot allow a militarily overstretched France to descend into hostile relations with the UK.

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