

New Year, new rules: UK begins post-Brexit future

Divisions over Brexit, both political and social, remain deep and are likely to last for years, despite a muted end to the saga overshadowed by the global health crisis.

Britain on Friday began a new year and life outside the European Union after leaving the bloc's single market, with the first trucks crossing the Channel by ferry and rail reporting largely plain sailing despite new customs rules.

Brexit, which has dominated politics on both sides of the Channel since 2016, became reality an hour before midnight, ending the United Kingdom's 48-year obligation to follow Brussels' rules.

Free movement of over 500 million people between Britain and the 27 EU states ended.

More rigorous customs checks returned for the first time in decades, despite the hard-fought brokering of a tariff- and quota-free trade deal.

But the approach to key port Dover, where ferries to and from northern France dock, was quiet as dawn broke.

"It's good to see the port's done its job and there's no backlog," said Alan Leigh, 52, of nearby Folkestone, taking an early morning stroll on the cliffs above Dover's docks.

Scores of heavy goods vehicles also passed through the Channel Tunnel connecting Britain and France by train "without any problem" early Friday, its operator said.

However, the British government, which is implementing a phased introduction of checks, expects next week to be the true test, once the quiet holiday period is over.

New Year's Day newspapers reflected the historic but still deeply divisive change, which will have repercussions for generations to come.

The front-page photograph on the pro-Brexit Daily Express showed the White Cliffs of Dover — an enduring symbol of Britishness — with “Freedom” written on a Union flag.

“Our Future. Our Britain. Our Destiny,” said the headline.

The pro-EU Independent was less sure: “Off the hook — or cut adrift?” it asked, reflecting widespread uncertainty at the path the country had now chosen.

Whether the United Kingdom will even stay united was also exercising minds as the pro-EU Scottish National Party steps up calls for a second referendum on independence.

“It’s a very sad day. Brexit puts a barrier in between my ability to be Scottish and my ability to be British,” retiree Bruce Borthwick told AFP in Edinburgh.

Practical changes

The Road Haulage Association, an industry body, estimates that some 220 million forms will now need to be filled in every year to comply with the new rules for transporting goods to and from mainland Europe, including permits to even drive on the roads leading to ports like Dover.

Ferry group Stena Line tweeted on Friday that six freight loads bound for EU member Ireland were turned away at Holyhead port in north Wales for not having the correct paperwork.

Practical changes include how long Britons can visit their holiday homes on the continent, to travel with pets, and an end to British involvement in an EU student programme.

Holidaymakers and business travellers used to seamless EU travel could face delays, although fears Britons will have to get international permits to drive in Europe were averted by a separate accord.

British fishermen are disgruntled at a compromise in the free trade agreement to allow continued access for EU boats in British waters, which has raised fears of clashes at sea.

The key financial services sector also faces an anxious wait to learn on what basis

it can keep dealing with Europe, after being largely omitted from the trade deal along with services in general, which account for 80 percent of Britain's economy.

In Northern Ireland, the border with Ireland will be closely watched to ensure movement is unrestricted — key to a 1998 peace deal that ended 30 years of violence over British rule.

'Unknown opportunities'

Despite the uncertainty, Prime Minister Boris Johnson is bullishly optimistic, writing in Friday's Daily Telegraph that Brexit presented "opportunities unknown to modern memory".

He said "the world has changed out of all recognition, and so has the UK" since the country joined the European Common Market in 1973.

"We need to keep pace with developments on the west coast of America and in the Pearl River delta," he added.

"We need the Brexit-given chance to turbo-charge those sectors in which we excel."

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Opinion polls indicate that most Britons want to move on and are far more worried about the worsening coronavirus pandemic, which has left more than 73,500 dead in Britain alone.

Johnson, who survived several days in intensive care with Covid last April, warned of tough times ahead but said a UK-developed vaccine offered grounds for hope.

Source:

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