

# **BREXIT METAPHORS: UNDERSTANDING BRITAIN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH EUROPE THROUGH MENTAL SHORTCUTS**

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## ***Abstract***

*Between 2017 and 2019, the author has created over 400 original metaphors to describe various aspects of the UK-EU relationship and the Brexit process. These topics are explored in 161 published blog articles on [www.BrexitMetaphors.blogspot.com](http://www.BrexitMetaphors.blogspot.com), which cover several broad themes: economic, political, historical, geographical and socio-cultural. In the present paper, the meaning of the metaphors is elaborated in brackets where it is not obvious.*

*Metaphors are exceptionally useful both to illustrate to an audience (explain and help to understand) and to influence an audience (consciously and unconsciously). "The metaphor is perhaps one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic...", said Ortega y Gasset. It is a thinking tool, along the lines of the definition of philosopher Daniel Dennett: "You cannot do much carpentry with your bare hands and you cannot do much thinking with your bare brain." Thus, the metaphor is a useful mental model, a mental shortcut.*

*At the same time, the burden of proof in designing a metaphor is low as any claims for similarities are alluded to, rather than stated outright, and the degree of parallelism may vary significantly. Therefore, it is often applied as a powerful tool of manipulation, e.g. in the articles of British Brexiteer politician Boris Johnson in *The Sunday Times*.*

## ***Key words***

*Brexit, metaphors, EU, referendum*

## Metaphors describing the Brexit process

In around 100 blog articles, the author draws analogies between Brexit and phenomena/objects/stories belonging to several themes. Brexit can be seen as:

- A) *A lie/illusion/fiction, similar to:*** a haunted house; horror story; fairy tale; the floating mountains of Avatar; alchemy; quack medicine; an oven that resembles a sauna (but functions differently); a bird in the sky (or a bird in the bush); Singapore-on-Thames chimera (deregulation paradise); hybrid offspring of crossing lions with unicorns (from the royal coat of arms); a roaring lion (but actually a purring puma, two notches below in the pecking order); ignorance-begotten confidence (explained by the Dunning-Kruger effect); sunglasses rather than spectacles (achieving visual effect without functionality); Cakeism (“have your cake and eat it”) and Proseccoism (a cocktail of egocentrism and oversimplification, derived from Boris Johnson’s use of trade examples with Italian prosecco); “genie in a bottle” (a delusion) coupled with “message in a bottle” (cry for help); an attempt at teleportation;
- B) *A hollow promise:*** an empty suitcase; empty champagne glasses (easy to topple over); the promise of “Jam Tomorrow, Mañana, Inshallah” (small probability of success); fireworks (rather than the actual stars);
- C) *A chaotic mess:*** earphones tangled into a knot; spaghetti junction at which one takes a wrong turn; Italian-style disagreement on everything; a sausage with two ends (or even more possible ends, depending on when Brexit happens); project overrun similar to the 2004 Athens Olympics; China’s 1930s Long March; China’s disastrous 1950s Great Leap Forward, coupled with a Leap in the Dark; the “Soviet civilisation”; five animals in the Chinese zodiac; Britain shooting itself in the foot; Britain blowing its nose (with mucus landing on its sleeve); a plane flying in a storm in circles in search of the jet stream; air turbulence for years; menagerie (zoo) posing as a football team; fudge candy that creates a badly fudged situation; bruise on the face with changing colours; bottomless Eton mess (dessert); the collapsing London Bridge from a popular nursery rhyme;
- D) *A serious problem:*** open-heart surgery presented as a haircut; kidney stones; clogged up sink; a wart on Britain’s face; burnt milk and spilt milk; a plane’s hard landing (rather than a ship’s smooth sail-

ing); driving an SUV on railway tracks; driving on red lights; cracked phone screen; death caused by a falling coconut; “burning down the house to get rid of the mouse”; roses with only thorns and no flowers; throwing darts in a bouncy castle; hangover after getting drunk on sovereignty;

**E) *The moment of truth*:** wrestling match (not a dance); getting off the fence (after sitting on the fence, i.e. Britain’s failing to commit fully to being In or Out of the EU); eye opener; clash of Johari Windows, in which the EU Facade shatters Britain’s Blind Spot (full text below);

**F) *Point of no return*:** Britain burning its bridges; Britain locking itself out of the house; toothpaste that has been squeezed out of the tube and cannot be pushed back in; taking the country back to square one (similar to communism in Eastern Europe);

**G) *De-domestication*:** rewilding project (the opposite of domestication: reintroduction of wild animals); making a dog (harmonious society) evolve back into a wolf (unbridled capitalism), or at least a dingo (Singapore-on-Thames).

### **Metaphors for the EU as a whole and for some negative UK views of Europe pre-2016:**

In around 20 blog articles, the author draws analogies on Europe as a protective environment and valuable club of cooperating partners, juxtaposed with exactly the opposite views of Brexiteers:

- EU is a shark cage (providing protection from the sharks outside: other trading giants such as the USA, China, etc.);
- EU is a potato plant whose value lies hidden underground (in the invisible tubers, not in the visible leaves);
- EU is a beehive (of cooperation) that the UK views as a hornets’ nest;
- UK and EU are not a divorcing couple but Siamese twins (however, one is fully formed, while the other is missing some vital organs);
- The Single Market is an IKEA bookcase, not a Lego set (i.e. a cohesive system with pieces that are not easily replaceable);
- EU membership was a life vest for UK's economy in the 1970s and 1980s;

- UK needed its own Shenzhen experiment ("Eden-Outside-EU") instead of Brexit: (a suggestion to run a mini-experiment with Brexit by first carving out Cornwall and placing it outside the EU to test the consequences);
- Britain is a king but the EU is a queen in a grand game of chess (Brexiters value unbounded sovereignty: they want Britain to be "the king of the castle". However, in chess the king is merely a symbolical ruler while the most powerful piece is the queen, who can move in all directions.)
- Britain is the onion in the EU burger: highly prized, but difficult. (The EU is a burger composed of: two buns, Germany and France; Italian ketchup; Spanish lettuce; Polish pickles; Dutch cheese; and ground beef: all the other smaller Member States. Britain is the sautéed onion that makes the burger taste better, but is hard and unpleasant to prepare.).

## **Metaphors for the 2016 EU Referendum**

Another 20 blog articles are devoted to exploring analogies related to the unexpected outcome of the Brexit referendum and the reasons for this outcome:

- Rock-Paper-Scissors can predict what Brexit will deliver (Game Theory can scope out the outcome in a continuous game from referendum to negotiations to a second referendum);
- EU is a punchbag for ungrateful politicians. Dogs, beware! ("give a dog a bad name and hang him");
- How did the Brexiteer seagulls become Hitchcock's "Birds" (David Cameron started appeasing the anti-EU Tory back-benchers);
- Brexiters are electrons: energy without substance. Remainers are protons: substance with disproportionately little energy;
- The Brexit vote was a 112 emergency call;
- Brexit through the prism of Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking, Fast and Slow*: oversimplified problem gets the wrong treatment;
- Fruit keep ripening after being picked. Voters keep learning after being consulted in referendum (laying out the argument for a 2<sup>nd</sup> referendum);
- 2016 EU referendum and Concorde planes are both sunk costs (and sunk costs should not constrain the options for the future);
- The Great American Interchange and the Great European Short-change (full text below);
- Northern Ireland is a cat's tail trapped in the door of the EU (and now the tail is wagging the cat: the whole of the UK);

- Brexit's split identity: between giving the fig and hiding behind a fig leaf. (Many Brits voted for Brexit in a snub to the establishment. The EU referendum offered an opportunity to "give the fig" to the ruling elite, which was seized in large numbers by Labour supporters in the North of England. At the same time, many Tories in the south of England are using Brexit as a fig leaf to hide their diverse but narrow interests: from nationalists who dislike immigration to hedge-fund managers who detest the EU cap on banker bonuses to Brexiteer politicians who see an opportunity to upend the political hierarchy and go up the political ladder. Conveniently, the fig leaf is big enough to cover all these narrow interests at the point where they intersect: Britain's relationship with the EU.);

- Brexit is a mix of marmite & dynamite (love it or hate it, it is explosive anyway);

- The referendum struck a match inside a fuel tank:

Once there was a man who lit a match to see if a fuel tank was full or empty. He won a Darwin Award (True story). Once there was a man (David Cameron) who asked a whole country to vote on EU membership. He won a cosy retirement. Who knew that when you light a match inside a petrol tank, it would explode? Who knew that when you hold a referendum to ask a simple question on a complex matter, a whole country would implode?

## **Metaphors for the UK's post-Brexit future**

In around 50 blog articles, the author has scoped out diverse possible scenarios for Britain's future:

- Brexit-inspired mutinies in Parliament can land Britain in the Bermuda Triangle;

- Coronation chicken will soon be a chlorinated chicken. Sorry, Elizabeth! (UK will need a free trade agreement with the USA, which will insist on market access for its agricultural products: hormone beef and chlorinated chicken);

- Britain is a seagull that wants to eat on its own. But can it catch fish alone?

- Becoming an island: creating "siege mentality" is the only argument for Brexit (creating a sense of urgency may lead to positive developments after Britain has burned its bridges);

- Britain outside the EU magnetic field would be "left out in the rain" (unprotected);

- Britain wants to launch itself out of the EU and orbit as a comet. Weight and thrust pose a problem (only smaller countries like Norway and Switzerland have so far managed to achieve a “comet” status);
- Hong Kong to the UK: what a small island can teach a bigger one about global gateways (A city needs a hinterland to serve as a gateway, but Britain is about to give up its European hinterland.);
- The City of London had the best table in the EU. Post-Brexit it may move to the toilet. (The UK finance industry may suffer job losses and reallocation of assets.);
- Hard Brexit parallels: West Berlin and the Continental Blockade (historical cases of isolation);
- A tale of two islands: Japan and Madagascar (diverging island futures);
- UK: big fish in a small pond may become fish out of water;
- What Australia's Valley of Death can teach Britain (automotive industry may never recover);
- Brexit Britain is Chicago in winter – not a musical (Airlines cordon off their flights to Chicago airport in winter to avoid contagion within the network in case of weather disruptions. Similarly, companies may cordon off their UK operations to avoid contagion with the rest of their European operations.);
- Post-Brexit trade negotiations: When chased by a bear, don't be the slowest one (Britain has voluntarily agreed to become the weakest side in the future trade negotiations, as any EU Member State may veto a future agreement.);
- In “the European version of hell”, the UK may need to switch from services to manufacturing (full text below);
- A tale of three cities: Singapore-on-Thames, Minsk-on-Trent, Venice-on-Severn (full text below);

## **Metaphors for cancelling Brexit or holding a 2<sup>nd</sup> referendum**

- This is how UK's withdrawal ends: *"not with a bang, but a whimper"* (after multiple defeats of the Withdrawal Agreement in Parliament);
- Stairs that go up also come down. So does Brexit.
- Can a country be "half-pregnant"? Or could Brexit be aborted? (A “halfway house” to the EU membership already exists for Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Switzerland, Andorra, Monaco, San Marino and Turkey).

## **Seven metaphor articles based on complex frameworks (full text)**

### **May's Brexit plan is riddled with bullet holes like WW2 plane, yet a key plan is still missing**

Theresa May's 10<sup>th</sup> defeat in the Parliament over Brexit on February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2019 shows there was no love lost between her and her MPs on Valentine's Day. Her Brexit plans keep coming back riddled with votes against her like British Royal Air Force (RAF) fighter planes coming back from missions in World War II, riddled with bullet holes from German anti-aircraft fire. Her big mistake is that she is trying to fix the bullet holes, which are not essential. Instead, she should be tackling the life-or-death matters.

One of the most fundamental moments in the science of statistics comes from one such episode in World War II, when the RAF decided to armour up its planes to better protect them from enemy fire. The instinctive decision was to count the bullet holes in different parts of planes returning from mission and reinforce the areas that got hit most often. However, this was an obvious but wrong decision, as mathematician Abraham Wald noted at the time. If a plane came back at all, the number of bullet holes did not matter, as holes in areas such as the wings indicated non-essential damage. What really mattered were the areas that did not contain bullet holes on surviving planes (the engines and the propellers), as the planes that got hit in exactly those areas would not have survived at all and would not have returned to the base to be included in the study sample.

Theresa May should similarly ask herself what Brexit deals she has NOT managed to bring back to Parliament, rather than trying to armour up the damaged areas of the deal that she has brought back. A deal containing a second EU referendum (People's Vote) or a negotiated Customs Union would be the essential missing planes in her fleet returning from the Continent.

### **The EU shares the centre ground with UN peacekeepers and ice-cream sellers – and gets the blame for it**

The EU is viewed in Britain just as UN peacekeepers are viewed in some conflict zones: people on both sides of the divide think the peacekeepers are against them. In Britain the left wing think the EU is a neoliberal capitalist structure, while the right wing think the EU is a socialist construct. On a plane in 2016, a retired Conservative pro-Brexit couple tried to convince me

that *The Financial Times* was a left-wing newspaper because it was a pro-EU newspaper. The truth is the EU is right in the middle: balancing between 28 governments that span the whole political spectrum.

The “sit in the middle” phenomenon has deep roots in game theory: it was first described in 1929 and given the name Hotelling's Law. It is also known as “the ice-cream sellers’ problem”. If there are two ice-cream sellers on a beach, the rational strategy for each of them would be to put their stand right in the middle of the beach in order to maximise their market access to the entire beach. As an unintended consequence, the two sellers end up back-to-back with each other. This is the reason why liquor stores, furniture shops or fast food joints often cluster together in a single street. The EU does not want to alienate governments of any colour, so it sits in the middle of the political spectrum and in the middle of the economic policy spectrum. But when the going gets tough, it also sits in the middle of the blame game.

### **Brexit through the prism of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*: an oversimplified problem gets wrong treatment**

When faced with a predator, an animal has to act fast or else it won't survive. Humans have similarly evolved to adopt simplified solutions to urgent problems. However, when faced with a complex but not urgent problem, one should take time and deliberate, advises Daniel Kahneman, the psychologist and behavioural economist who won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2002. Kahneman describes these as two systems of thinking in his 2011 book "*Thinking, Fast and Slow*":

System 1: fast, instinctive and emotional;

System 2: slower, deliberative and logical.

In a war, countries have to think and act fast. The battlefield is usually in chaos, to which IBM's Cynefin framework applies: in chaos the only possible strategy is to do something, anything (so that one can get back to the firmer ground of managed complexity). However, in peacetime slow deliberation is advisable. When one manages an ecosystem (whether biological or socio-economic), one has to grasp and embrace complexity and understand that every action has multiple consequences.

Yet, this is not what happened in the 2016 EU referendum in Britain and in the Brexit process. An oversimplified solution was given to the British



people (*In* or *Out*) and they voted *Leave* with great urgency. The resulting mess continues to this day.

Einstein said that “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.” Consultants often use a 2x2 matrix to simplify the world. The EU referendum did not even go to this level of complexity and only offered a one-dimensional vote. Thus, when both the problem and the solution go down a mistaken thinking process, the problem is likely to be bogus and the solution is likely to be a chimera.

## **EU Facade shatters British Blind Spot in clash of Johari Windows**

The UK and the EU are two Johari Windows, each with its own typical set of 4 quadrants: from "known knowns" to "unknown unknowns".

***Britain's Johari Window:*** In its interaction with the EU, the UK is in the Blind Spot quadrant: Britain thought it had power in the negotiation while in reality it had limited clout. Because of the British Empire, the victory in the Second World War (WW2), the Commonwealth and the English language, Britain thought it was still a great power, while in the new world order it is merely a medium-sized country.

**1) *EU Johari Window:*** In its interaction with the UK, the EU is in the Facade quadrant: It presents a strong position externally, but actually it knows that it is internally fragile. The EU is a global trading giant and sets global benchmarks for regulations and environmental standards but its Member States (including the UK) have been passing on to Brussels the blame for any negatively-perceived domestic policy for decades, commonly known as “Brussels-bashing”. As a result, the sustainability and survival of the EU is contingent on projecting external power to convince its constituent members that it is worth sticking with.

“When elephants fight, the grass suffers.” When windows collide, the glass shatters. The EU has held the high ground in the negotiations with the UK but if Britain's withdrawal spirals out of control into Hard Brexit, there will be many losers and a lot of broken glass.

However, Paddington Bear, the Loch Ness Monster, the Queen, James Bond and Sherlock Holmes will still be around, in case you are a tourist and

started wondering. While Winnie-the-Pooh may finally get his own Doge's Palace.

### **In “the European version of hell”, the UK may need to switch from services to manufacturing**

There is a popular joke about the European versions of heaven and hell based on national stereotypes. In the European heaven: the British are the police; the French are the cooks; the Germans are the mechanics; the Italians are the lovers; and the Swiss make everything run on time. On the other hand, in the European version of hell the roles are reversed: the British are the cooks; the French are the mechanics; the Germans are the police; the Swiss are the lovers; and the Italians make everything run on time.

Britain, France and Germany take each other's place in the heaven-and-hell merry-go-round / musical chairs (police, cooks and mechanics). But might Brexit actually disturb the existing fine balance in national economic specialisations: services in the UK; lifestyle and luxury goods in France; manufacturing for Germany?

If Britain's dominant services industry (e.g. financial and professional services) suffers as a result of Brexit, would Britain then be able to start focusing on manufacturing, especially under Singapore-on-Thames labour-market deregulation?

### **A tale of three cities: Singapore-on-Thames, Minsk-on-Trent, Venice-on-Severn**

Brexiteers dream of turning Britain into a deregulated free-trade paradise commonly referred to as "Singapore-on-Thames". Remainers fearing isolation and economic decline will convert the UK into "Minsk-on-Trent". The most likely outcome from Brexit is probably somewhere in the middle: I call it "Venice-on-Severn".

Singapore-on-Thames is a pipe dream, given the political traditions of the UK, the recent rise of Corbynism and the size of the country. Minsk-on-Trent is a bugbear: even under Jeremy Corbyn as a possible future Prime Minister, the UK is unlikely to slide into authoritarian rule. However, Venice-on-Severn is, sadly, a realistic prospect.

Venice lost its prime position as the trading and banking hub of Europe in the 1500s after the Ottomans cut off the access to the Middle Eastern trade routes and the resulting Age of Discovery definitively moved trade flows from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic. Venice did not disappear completely, but it was reduced to the status of a "museum of nostalgia" for rich European (and now Chinese) tourists.

The UK is about to give up voluntarily many of its European supply chain networks (including all manufacturing that depends on just-in-time delivery from Europe) and will hand over a chunk of the thriving financial sector of the City of London to European competitors Paris, Frankfurt, Amsterdam and Dublin.

### **The Great American Interchange and the Great European Shortchange**

Until three million years ago, North America (including Mexico and Central America) was separate from South America and there was an ocean in the middle. Then around three million years ago, the Isthmus of Panama rose up from the sea floor and created a land bridge linking the two continents: a phenomenon known as the Great American Interchange. After that the New World was never the same again. Many northern species, including jaguars, pumas, llamas and a tonne of other animals invaded the South and thrived. But only three South American species moved north and spread out in any large numbers (the armadillo, the opossum and the porcupine). The reason for this discrepancy was that northern animals had had millions of years to evolve and acclimatise to tropical conditions in Mexico and Central America, which had served as a nursery for their southern expansion. On the other hand, southern animals had only lived in the tropics so the northern plains and mountains were not a possible habitat for them.

The creation of the EU is a similar story of competition among economic and social species: a Great European Interchange. The Common Market served as a training ground for the global expansion of the most competitive European companies: Airbus, German carmakers, a few pharmaceutical firms and the banks and funds of the City of London. These companies became the jaguars and the pumas of the corporate world. On the other hand, freedom of movement exposed to transcontinental competition European blue-collar workers who hadn't acclimatised to globalisation. These

workers, just like the South American species, became the losers from the Great European Interchange. Their sidelining ultimately led to Brexit and to the other (lesser) anti-EU social movements on the continent, as the EU for them felt more like "a Great European Shortchange." In Britain, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown set up a short-lived Migration Impact Fund at the end of his rule in an attempt to mitigate the consequences of globalisation for manufacturing workers. Unfortunately, this fund was closed by the next British Prime Minister, David Cameron, who took over from 2010. Cameron didn't see the writing on the wall until it was too late – which cost him losing the ill-fated EU referendum in 2016.

There was one key difference between the Great American Interchange and the Great European Shortchange. Three million years ago, the different species in the Americas could only vote with their feet. In present-day Europe, all people can vote in elections and referendums, so leaving behind a large segment of the population feeling shortchanged was never going to be a successful recipe for cohesive political and economic development.

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