

# “BREXIT”: A BRITISH DRAMA, A CHALLENGE FOR THE EU

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The British people’s decisive vote in favour of leaving the European Union has triggered a myriad of different reactions which we need to put into perspective on the basis of a few simple considerations: the “Brexit” is first and foremost a British drama; it is the result of a national democratic choice that is a specific, unique case; and it constitutes an additional challenge for the EU, whose supporters need to better assert why we are stronger together. The Jacques Delors Institute takes a stand in this Viewpoint.

A shorter version of this Tribune was published in [EurActiv.com](#), [Huffingtonpost.de](#), [Le Figaro](#), [La Repubblica](#), [La Vanguardia](#) and [To Vima](#).

## 1. The “Brexit” is primarily a British drama: render unto Shakespeare that which is Shakespeare’s

If the “Brexit” is an earthquake for the EU, it was triggered by the seismic fault line that has been a feature of relations between the United Kingdom and “Europe” from the outset. Numerous cyclical and circumstantial factors contributed to the outcome of the referendum, including rejection of the political and financial elites in London and power struggles within the Conservative Party. But the outcome also reflects the United Kingdom’s specific historical and geographical characteristics linked in particular to its insular nature, its imperial past, a more global economic gaze and its brave stand against Nazism, which explains why older British voters are not as “pro-European” as their counterparts in other EU countries. Nor should we too rapidly overlook the crass and unrelenting europhobia of the British tabloid press, which also played a key role in the outcome of the 23 June vote.

The British referendum campaign was naturally followed by the other peoples of the EU who sometimes got the feeling that they were “voting by proxy”. The campaign focused on issues which will continue to lie at the heart of the debate in most EU countries as well as in Brussels, such as [the free movement of people and workers](#) and [the distribution and exercise of powers and areas of authority between the EU and its member states](#). However, it is important that we render unto Shakespeare that which is Shakespeare’s: on the one hand, in order to explain the specific features

unique to the 23 June vote; and on the other hand to set out on the path of divorce embraced by the British people in order to then define the framework of a new partnership between the United Kingdom and the EU capable of reducing the negative economic, social and diplomatic impact of the “Brexit” as much as possible.

## 2. The “Brexit” is a national democratic choice, thus a specific case

The Union is not a “prison of peoples”: the British are free to leave it if a majority of them wish to do so, and it is within a framework of strict respect for the popular will that the actions of the London authorities and the EU member states and citizens need to be developed from now on.

The “Brexit” earthquake is going to spawn “aftershocks” in other European countries, sparking calls for national referenda on EU membership in a period of rising euroscepticism. [This predilection for referenda is frequently evinced by minority political forces](#) incapable of getting into power through the normal channels of representative democracy because they do not enjoy the support of a majority of the electorate in their respective countries. It’s up to them to win the next election in order to call a referendum, be it on the EU or on a whole host of other issues. The political confusion that has gripped London since the triumph of the “Leave” campaign reminds us that referenda can lead to victories won on the basis of *ad hoc*, protest-based and occasionally downright unnatural alliances

that fail to spawn a "plan B" or a clear and positive plan of action, which needs to continue being defined in the context of representative democracy.

As we look across the Channel, we should take care not to confuse euroscepticism, in other words (often contradictory) criticism of the EU and the deterioration of its image, with europhobia which is the will to leave the EU. Nor should we forget that, for many of its member states, leaving the EU would also mean leaving the euro and Schengen areas, and that that dual break would have far weightier consequences than Britain's "simple" exit, which nevertheless appears to be sufficiently destabilising for the United Kingdom on the economic and political fields. In short, we must guard against falling prey to the idea that the "Brexit" is the start of an "unraveling" of the EU, when the truth of the matter is that while the EU is facing major rifts between the peoples and the member states that make it up, they do not have the intention of slamming the door in its face. The "Brexit" is primarily an additional political challenge for the EU, which needs to immediately recognise the seriousness of the crisis gripping it and to act with ever greater vigour.

### 3. The "Brexit" must encourage emphasis on why we are stronger together

With all the respect that we owe our British friends who have opted to go it alone, the national and European authorities now need to focus more than ever on the numerous other pressing challenges which the EU has to face, by stressing why we are stronger together in this globalised world.

They need to lay additional emphasis on the fact that Europeans share a common will to reconcile economic efficiency with social cohesion and environmental safeguards in a pluralistic framework, and they need to reach decisions that translate this unique will for a balance not found anywhere else in the world into concrete action, in particular by supporting growth and employment - for instance through the launch of a major new investment plan expanding on the existing "Juncker Plan".

They need to make it clear that "strength lies in unity" at times when History takes a darker turn, and therefore promote the EU as the answer to multi-faceted threats that range from Islamist terrorism, chaos in Syria and in Libya, chaotic migratory movements and Russian aggressiveness to unbridled finance, energy dependence, climate change and China's thirst for power. All of these are threats and challenges where the EU must allow us to better shape our own fate by sharing our sovereignties, by building upon the welcome establishment of a European border guard corps.

The European and national authorities need to respond to the identity concerns voiced by EU citizens, who will account for 6% of the world's population after "Brexit" and who benefit from international economic and cultural liberalisation on a highly uneven basis - the launch of an "Erasmus Pro" programme for apprentices would be of keen symbolic importance in this connection.

In short, they need to lead their peoples into a new world which is at once bursting with opportunities but also fraught with threats, and in which Europe is in a less and less central position. This presupposes speaking to the hearts and minds of Europe's citizens, responding to their hopes and fears without downgrading them to the level of mere consumers and taxpayers: initiatives designed to strengthen our collective security would beneficially combine operational urgency and the emotional dimension, for instance through the creation of a European counter-terrorism prosecutor's office.

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The EU does not only need firemen, summoned by the "Brexit" to fight the blaze of a new crisis: its next step forward requires more than ever the mobilisation of architects and of prophets capable of restoring a compass and a soul to this unparalleled Union, forged in postwar grief but still making perfect sense in a globalised world for young people and future generations.

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