

## DOMINIC LAWSON: Macron and Co are risking recession in Europe just to teach Brexit Britain a lesson

There's no doubt about who is the favourite politician of anti-Brexiteers in this country. It's someone who doesn't even stand for election here. It's not [Tony Blair](#), still less John Major.

No; their hero is [Emmanuel Macron](#), the President of the Republic of France. Last week the Independent online newspaper (which campaigns for a second [Brexit](#) referendum to overturn the result of the first) adoringly headlined an account of Macron's latest attack on Brexit as follows: 'French President delivers brilliant speech after [Theresa May](#)'s deal is rejected by MPs.'

Actually, it's well worth looking at Macron delivering his onslaught to an audience in Normandy, an area of northern France not far from the Pas-de-Calais region, which is especially vulnerable to any trade disruptions in the event of a 'no-deal' Brexit. Their President attempted to reassure them that it would be the 'British who would be the first to suffer' if there were such an outcome, and went on, not for the first time, to denounce what he termed 'the lies' of the Brexit campaign.

But then he immediately unleashed two porkies of his own: 'The British people can't afford not to have a plane taking off or landing in their country; and 70 per cent of their supermarket supplies come from continental Europe.' In other words, if the British Parliament doesn't accede to the terms brokered by the European Commission, its people will be cut off from the rest of the world and starve.

The actual figures, as supplied by the UK's Office for National Statistics, are that 30 per cent of the food we consume is supplied by the EU. Macron's boast of 70 per cent is either extreme grandiosity (not unusual for him) or a deliberate untruth.

### Apocalyptic

And if there were a disorderly Brexit accompanied by the imposition of tariffs on food between the UK and the EU, I would imagine the cheese producers of Normandy might be the least delighted of all.

Personally, I would regret it, too, as I adore French cheese, but our domestic producers are increasingly imaginative and entrepreneurial: why, there is even something called Somerset Brie. And at Christmas, I tried the new British cheese known as Winslade, a remarkable cross between Vacherin and Camembert. It was gorgeous, a more than acceptable substitute for either of those two great French creations.

As for Macron's apocalyptic assertion that no planes would be able to enter or leave the UK if we left the EU without an agreement, this is the most preposterous iteration of Project Fear yet to be deployed in supposedly serious argument. For Macron knows as well as anyone — as the European Commission would not have agreed this without the full consent of the French government — that Brussels has published contingency plans if the UK leaves the EU without a deal; they set out that UK airlines will continue to be able to operate flights between the EU and this country for at least 12 months.

This is why the Association of British Travel Agents felt able last month to state: 'There is nothing to suggest that you will not be able to continue with your holiday plans after March 29 [the date of Britain's departure from the EU, with or without a deal].'

## Decline

So why is the French President lashing out in this way? The campaign for the European Parliament elections is imminent, and he is extremely concerned that the profoundly Eurosceptic National Rally party, formerly known as the Front National and led by Marine Le Pen, will make big gains.

Note, by the way, that Madame Le Pen herself is a representative of the Pas-de-Calais region. Although she is no longer advocating 'Frexit', Macron is driven by the conviction that if Brexit is not visibly terrible for the UK, then Marine Le Pen's Euroscepticism will gain tremendous traction in France. Indeed, when asked about this a year ago by the BBC's Andrew Marr, Macron admitted that if the French were to hold a referendum on EU membership, they would 'probably' vote to leave.

Then, Macron was still in his pomp, feted as the fresh voice of leadership for a European Union confident in its future, while the UK sank into Brexit-related economic decline. It's looking a bit different now. Macron — his opinion poll ratings having collapsed at a speed and a rate unprecedented in modern French political history — has been forced into a humiliating reversal of central elements in his programme. It was his only choice after the country's very stability was threatened by popular revolt on the streets. More ominously for the Eurozone as a whole, it is not just in France where industrial output is now contracting: the same is true in Germany. And Italy appears to be in full recession.

As the International Trade Secretary Liam Fox pointed out yesterday, the most recent official figures show the UK economy performing markedly better than those three largest Eurozone member states. And, should the worst come to the worst, with another European-wide recession, it is British banks which are now the best capitalised, and regional banks in Italy and Germany the most vulnerable.

The Guardian's chief economic commentator Larry Elliott observed a fortnight ago: 'Britain's debate on Brexit currently seems based on three propositions. That continental Europe is thriving; that Europe's politicians will come under no pressure to cut a deal from their big companies; and that Britain is well adrift at the bottom of Europe's economic league table. All three are false.' That was prescient. Last week the president of Germany's industrial federation, Dieter Kempf, told journalists in Berlin that the British parliament's rejection of the withdrawal agreement hatched between Mrs May and the European Commission took matters 'dangerously close to a chaotic Brexit' which would leave his members (the biggest German companies) 'staring into the abyss.'

If the British Parliament is to avert this then that is most likely to require a change in the 'Irish backstop': ostensibly in order to protect peace on the island of Ireland, this element in the withdrawal agreement means that until a future trade deal is agreed the UK will never be able to escape from the EU's customs union. We could be stuck in a non-voting limbo.

It is principally this which caused a mass of Conservative MPs to reject Mrs May's deal in the Commons last week: without winning them back, she has no chance of a different outcome in a future vote. Although the 'indefinite' backstop is the pride and joy of the Irish government — it was designed principally to address their concerns — there is now great anxiety in Dublin about what will happen if it turns out to be the reason for no deal being agreed at all.

## Unprepared

Last week the head of the Irish Exporters Association, Simon McKeever, declared the country was 'totally unprepared' for a no-deal Brexit: 'If it happens, to put it bluntly, we are screwed.'

Unfortunately for Mr McKeever's concerns, or indeed for those of German exporters and French farmers, I see vanishingly little chance of the European Commission re-opening the Withdrawal Agreement which Mrs May failed so dismally to sell to the Commons.

With some reason, they don't believe Theresa May will ever go for a 'no-deal' Brexit. And even if she did, they think it's worth risking recession throughout Europe if that's what's necessary to teach the Brexiting Brits a lesson.

As if to demonstrate that mindset in Brussels, the French magazine Le Point last week reported a conversation from 2016 with the EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, in which the Frenchman declared: 'I shall have succeeded in my task if the final deal is so hard on the British that in the end they'll prefer staying in the EU.' We can't say we weren't warned. But I don't see the British people quailing in the face of President Macron's latest threats. The British Parliament, however, is another matter.