

## Analysis

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## Despite Brexit, I'm proud to be a Brit

By John Lloyd

This is a fine time to be British. Indeed, to be proud to be British. You would not, to be sure, think so from this past week in London - as the House of Commons humiliated Prime Minister Theresa May by throwing out her plan for Brexit in Tuesday by 432 votes to 202 - an unprecedented rejection. On Wednesday, the Labour Party moved that her government had lost the confidence of the House - a maneuver defeated only narrowly, by 325 votes to 306.

The British, and foreign, news media would guide you to seeing the events as pure, destructive chaos. In an article for CNN, Stephen Collinson writes of the United States and the UK that it's "hard to believe that two such robust democracies, long seen by the rest of the world as beacons of stability, have dissolved into such bitter civic dysfunction." Hard to believe only if you see democracy as the smooth management of affairs by an elite. This is what democracy looks like when a citizenry is grappling with fundamental issues - or should.

A nationwide debate is under way on the nature of British - and by extension European - governance, which has rumbled and grumbled under the surface for decades. The decision by then Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, to hold a referendum on European Union membership in 2016 - a decision he now says he does not regret - was one for which he believed he could win easy assent.

This was in part a question of internal party management, but it had support from influential voices in Labour too, and addressed a threat of widespread desertion from both major parties to the quickly growing United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). The politicians, especially those from the bulk of England outside of the rich, cosmopolitan south-east, heard the growing clamor of men and women whose living standards had stagnated, as well as from those who called for more democratic control from a political center they could understand and influence - the Westminster parliament.

Like any such wide and deep civic disruption, the vote for Brexit exacts the price of economic instability and likely future reduction in national GDP. Fear of this prompted me - and others - to vote to remain in the EU. That fear has spread: a poll this week showed that Remainers could outvote Brexiters by as much as ten percent: a poll last month showed the gap at 18 percent. Indications like these encourage Remainers to call for a second referendum, a proposal which could cleave British politics into two warring camps, but may also be the only way out of a parliamentary logjam, where no single strategy commands a majority. Uncertainty attends every move: such is the nature of a popular surge seeking - peacefully - a different relationship with political power.

Democratic turmoil has also come to Europe - but not to the European Union. The two national leaders most committed to reviving a movement to greater EU integration - French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel - have themselves been drawn into democratic maelstroms, which have meant they are both much weakened at home.

The Brussels leadership of the EU - Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and European Council President Donald Tusk - have not had the same popular drubbing. They seem not to have grasped that Brexit, and the surge of France's "gilets jaunes" protesters, are hugely consequential movements not just for Britain and France, but for the Union as a whole. The EU presently faces its own, increasing strains and the strengthening possibility of recession - prompted by Italy's rising debt and its reluctance to be bound by EU financial restraints, the end of a long period of quantitative easing which kept interest rates rock bottom - and Brexit itself.

Herein lies the central problem of the EU now. It has chosen to present itself as an adamant front of 27 states wholly united against the renegade 28th, the UK. They have entrusted the EU's chief Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, to set out the hard facts of a deal which lays down a two-year withdrawal period in which most EU rules would continue to apply, with a severance payment of £39bn (\$50 billion). It's a divorce agreement which may not rival that of Jeff and Mackenzie Bezos, since that could come out at \$66bn. But it would take a sizable morsel out of the UK's GDP (at \$2.6 trillion in 2017).

Yet the hard front is an illusion. The Central European states - Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia - want continued EU subsidies but recoil from its policies, especially taking a share of the immigrants within Europe. Italy now has a populist government which defies the EU on its spending limits. The country's rising debt and falling industrial output, together with that of the other main members, now helps to pull the Union towards recession. The "Hanseatic League" of small northern states, under Dutch leadership, explicitly defies any efforts to bring the Union "ever closer" - the strategy to which Juncker and Tusk, as well as Macron, are bound.

This is not a band of brotherly states marching towards a Federal Europe. It is a group of countries of differing political traditions and cultures, with enough in common to have a single market and a growing tradition of cooperation - but with only selective, and minority, appetite to create more than that.

*NOTE: John Lloyd co-founded the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. The opinions expressed here are his own. — Reuters*



In this file photo taken on June 30, 2018, people hold placards during a 'Families Belong Together' march and rally in Los Angeles. — AFP

## Immigrants pay big for basics at ICE lockups

Detained in a California lockup with hundreds of other immigrants seeking asylum, Douglas Cruz faced a choice. He could content himself with a jailhouse diet that he said left him perpetually hungry. Or he could labor in the prison's kitchen to earn money to buy extra food at the commissary. Cruz went to work. But his \$1-a-day salary at the privately run Adelanto Detention Facility did not stretch far.

A can of commissary tuna sold for \$3.25. That is more than four times the price at a Target store near the small desert town of Adelanto, about two hours northeast of Los Angeles. Cruz stuck with ramen noodles at 58 cents a package, double the Target price. A miniature deodorant stick, at \$3.35 and more than three days' wages, was an impossible luxury, he said. "If I bought that there wouldn't be enough money for food," Cruz said.

Tuna and deodorant would seem minor worries for detainees such as Cruz. Now 25, he sought asylum after fleeing gangs trying to recruit him in his native Honduras, a place where saying "no" can mean execution. But immigration attorneys say the pricey commissary goods are part of a broader strategy by private prisons to harness cheap inmate labor to lower operating costs and boost profits.

Immigrants and activists say facilities such as Adelanto, owned by Boca Raton, Florida-based Geo Group Inc, the nation's largest for-profit corrections company, deliberately skimp on essentials, even food, to coerce detainees to labor for pennies an hour to supplement meager rations. Geo Group spokesperson Pablo Paez called those allegations "completely false." He said detainees are given meals approved by dietitians, the labor program is strictly voluntary, and wage rates are federally mandated.

The company said Geo Group contracts with outside vendors to run its commissaries, whose prices "are in line with comparable local markets." It also said Geo Group makes a "minimal commission" on commissary items, most of which goes into a "welfare fund" to purchase recreational equipment and other items for detainees. Relatives can send money electronically to fund their loved ones' commissary accounts, for fees that can reach as high as 10 percent of the amount deposited, some families report. But for many immigrant detainees, scrubbing toilets or mopping floors is the only way they say they can earn enough to

stay clean and fed. You "either work for a few cents an hour or live without basic things like soap, shampoo, deodorant and food," detainee Wilhen Hill Barrientos, 67, said in a class-action lawsuit filed last year by the Southern Poverty Law Center against Nashville-based CoreCivic Inc, the nation's second-largest for-profit prison operator. In the complaint, Barrientos said guards told him to "use his fingers" when he asked for toilet paper at the Stewart Detention Center, located in rural Lumpkin, Georgia.

Detainees are challenging what they say is an oppressive business model in which the companies deprive them of essentials to force them to work for sub-minimum wages, money that is soon recaptured in the firms' own commissaries. "These private prison companies are profiting off of what is essentially a company-store scenario," said the SPLC's Meredith Stewart, a lead attorney on the class action.

Immigrant rights groups have filed similar lawsuits against CoreCivic and Geo Group in California, Colorado, Texas and Washington. Government watchdogs and lawmakers are taking notice too. In November, 11 US senators, including 2020 presidential hopeful Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, sent letters to Geo Group and CoreCivic lambasting the "perverse profit incentive at the core of the private prison business", which has benefited from a crackdown on illegal immigrants under US President Donald Trump.

The senators cited a December 2017 report from the US Office of the Inspector General documenting problems at lockups contracted by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). The inspector general found spoiled, moldy and expired food, and cited detainees' complaints that hygiene products were "not provided promptly or at all", the report said. The lawmakers have demanded Geo Group and CoreCivic respond to allegations of detainee mistreatment.

Geo Group said a comprehensive, detailed response is underway. The company told Reuters that Geo Group has "already taken steps to remedy areas where our processes fell short of our commitment to high-quality care". CoreCivic spokeswoman Amanda Gilchrist said the company disagrees with the senators' assertions, and that it provides "all daily needs" of detainees. She said CoreCivic

follows all federal standards for ICE-contracted facilities, including management of the outside vendors that run its commissaries, prices for commissary products, and fees charged to families for depositing funds into detainees' commissary accounts.

### Bull market in immigrant detention

The US for-profit prison industry has exploded over the past two decades. In 2016, 128,300 people - roughly 1 in 12 US prisoners - were incarcerated in private lockups. That is an increase of 47 percent from 2000, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Geo Group and CoreCivic together manage over half of US private prison contracts, with combined revenues of nearly \$4 billion in 2017. ICE is the No. 1 customer by revenue for both companies.

Trump's immigration policies have been a boon for the industry, which spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on his election and inauguration. In fiscal 2019, the number of people in ICE detention has averaged 45,200 daily, according to agency spokesman Vincent Picard. That is up nearly 19 percent from fiscal 2017. Both Geo Group and CoreCivic have added hundreds of immigration detention beds over the past year. Stock prices for the two companies are up about 30 percent since Trump's election.

The government pays private prison companies fees ranging from roughly \$60 to \$130 daily for the care and feeding of each detainee. At CoreCivic's Stewart Detention Center in Georgia, which houses about 1,700 undocumented immigrants, ICE pays a per diem of \$62.03 for each detainee housed there. CoreCivic's revenue from Stewart alone was \$38 million last year, court records show.

Detainee Barrientos, the lead lawsuit plaintiff, said in court documents he worked seven days a week at the facility in order to purchase hygiene products and phone cards to call family members in Guatemala. Those basics can add up. Reuters viewed a copy of the center's commissary price list. It shows detainees are charged \$11.02 for a 4 oz tube of Sensodyne toothpaste, available on Amazon.com for \$5.20. Dove soap priced at \$2.44 at the commissary is available for just over a dollar at Target. A 2.5 oz tube of Effergrip denture cream that sells for \$4.99 at Walmart is \$7.12 at the commissary. — Reuters

## EU patience with Iran wearing thin

In Tehran on Jan 8 during a meeting with European envoys, Iranian officials abruptly stood up, walked out and slammed the door in an extraordinary break with protocol. The French, British, German, Danish, Dutch, and Belgian diplomats in the Iranian foreign ministry room had incensed the officials with a message that Europe could no longer tolerate ballistic missile tests in Iran and assassination plots on European soil, according to four EU diplomats.

"There was a lot of drama, they didn't like it, but we felt we had to convey our serious concerns," one of the diplomats said. "It shows the relationship is becoming more tense," a second said. An Iranian official declined to comment on the meeting. The next day, the European Union imposed its first sanctions on Iran since world powers agreed the 2015 Vienna nuclear arms control deal with Tehran.

The sanctions were largely symbolic but the stormy meeting encapsulated the unexpected shift in European diplomacy since the end of last year. Smaller, more dovish EU countries have joined France and Britain in a harder stance on Tehran, including considering new economic sanctions, diplomats say. Those could include asset freezes and travel bans on Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Iranians developing the Islamic Republic's ballistic missile program, three diplomats said.

The new approach moves Europe closer to US President Donald Trump's policy of isolating Iran with tough sanctions even though European governments still support the 2015 Vienna deal from which he withdrew in May. Although there are diverging views in Europe, the shift could have consequences for President Hassan Rouhani's government as it looks to European capitals to salvage that deal. It could also strengthen anti-Western sentiment in Iran and lead to more aggressive Iranian moves around the Middle East, where the Islamic Republic is involved in proxy wars with its main regional

rival Saudi Arabia. Iran's firing of short-range ballistic missiles into Syria on Sept 30, missile tests and a satellite launch this month have niggled Western powers. For Europe, alleged assassination plots by Iran on French and Danish soil in 2018 were the last straw, diplomats say. Tehran denies the plots and says the missile tests are purely defensive. "The accusations against Iran over the past few months have awoken a few countries in Europe that were against a tougher line on Iran," a European-based Middle East diplomat said.

The same day as the meeting, the Netherlands publicly blamed Iran for killings on its soil in 2015 and 2017. Tehran denies any involvement. Then on Jan 9, the EU designated a unit of Iran's intelligence ministry a terrorist organization, froze its assets and those of two men. "Take the Dutch for example. They had kept very quiet until the Danish attack and now they are more hawkish than the French," said the diplomat.

Alarmed by Trump's "America First" policy, Europe considered his May 8 decision to pull out of the Iran accord a severe setback but Iran's international ambitions appear to offer Brussels and Washington a chance to work more closely. A US State Department official said there was now "a growing international consensus" on the range of Iranian threats. "The US welcomes Europe's efforts to counter Iranian terrorism on European soil, its missile launches, human rights abuses, and other threats," the official said.

### Dialogue falters

As the Trump administration accused Iran last year of harboring nuclear ambitions and fomenting instability in the Middle East through its support for militant groups in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen, the EU sought dialogue with Tehran. At meetings between European and Iranian diplomats last year, Britain, France, Germany and Italy, pressed for gestures on Iran's role in Syria's war and for help to end the conflict in Yemen.

But multiple bilateral talks on the ballistic missile program have yielded no results. The EU tried to show Iran that compliance with the nuclear accord would still mean economic benefits despite Trump's decision to reimpose US sanctions and choke off Iranian oil exports by pres-

suring US allies. The European Union is set to officially launch a mechanism, the special purpose vehicle (SPV) to trade with Iran later this month but it will not be operational for several months. It will be registered in France, run by a German and likely to include Britain as a shareholder.

"There's a feeling of frustration among Britain, France and Germany, and others, after the first phase of diplomacy with Iran," another senior EU diplomat said. "We thought we could get some effort from the Iranians in several areas." Iran says Europe may not be able to safeguard the nuclear deal anyway and accused European officials of dragging their feet.

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister and senior nuclear negotiator Abbas Araqchi said last week "operational steps" were needed from Europe as political support not enough. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of Iran's powerful Assembly of Experts said on Thursday Europe "would do nothing in our interest". "The Europeans are worse than the Americans. If not, they are not any better," he said, state TV reported.

Last March, as part of efforts to convince Trump to stick to the nuclear deal, France, Britain and Germany proposed asset freezes and travel bans on the IRGC and Iranian companies and groups developing the missile program, according to a document seen by Reuters. Now, a similar set of measures is being prepared, three diplomats say. "We'd prefer not to take these measures, but they need to stop trying to kill people on our territory and over the last three years they have beefed up their ballistic program," said one senior European diplomat.

The diplomats say getting all 28 EU members to agree will take time. The EU's top diplomat Federica Mogherini, who helped seal the 2015 deal, is wary of moving too fast for fear of provoking a complete collapse of the accord, four diplomats said. EU foreign ministers planned to issue a rare joint statement on Jan 21 about what they say is Iran's interference in the region and calling for an end to missile tests. Diplomats said Mogherini wants to see the SPV established first. An EU official denied any split in policy between Mogherini and EU governments, saying the statement will be published as soon as the SPV is launched. — Reuters