



## Post-Vote Eurocrats Want to Rush Brits Out the Door

**London should say no.**

Doug Bandow

June 28, 2016

The European Union's leaders said they wanted the United Kingdom to remain in the EU. But Brussels offered only minimal concessions to British Prime Minister David Cameron, undercutting his effort to sell the benefits of continued EU membership. Now the Eurocrats who dominate EU policy are attempting to push the UK out the door. London should refuse to play their game: slowing down the process would maximize its leverage.

The principal argument for the EU is that it has created a common economic market. The most powerful argument against it is that continental elites are attempting to create a superstate by stealth. The EU's post-vote behavior reinforces this criticism.

The vote to Leave shocked Eurocrats across Europe. Even many Brexit advocates believed that Remain would carry the day. Thus, the UK is just coming to terms with the magnitude of its people's decision. The British government is not prepared to announce a Brexit program.

However, EU leaders almost immediately began pressing London to act. They want the UK to trigger Article 50, which begins a two-year process to renegotiate a departing member's relationship with the EU. Once taken the decision cannot be reversed. And if no agreement is reached within two years the country is unceremoniously defenestrated without any special access to the European market. The provision almost certainly was drafted to maximize the EU's leverage.

Pushing the Brexit button would be a bad idea. The UK need not hurry. Nothing will change until Article 50 is implemented. The British government should hold off until it is ready.

First, the situation is chaotic. The prime minister is resigning. The opposition leader might be forced to resign. Scotland might again vote for independence. Northern Ireland might be forced to choose between its island neighbor, the Republic of Ireland, and its political home, the UK. No one is ready to discuss Brexit terms.

Second, with both leading parties in flux, waiting would allow a new government and opposition to emerge. The four largest parliamentary parties supported remaining in the EU, so they should attempt to reach a common exit program. While it is difficult to imagine legislators refusing to

respect the popular will, how to implement the vote remains to be decided. A new government should be in office first.

Third, the Eurocrats have split between those determined to impose punitive terms in order to discourage other states from leaving and those who prefer to be generous and maximize continued cooperation. Better to let passions cool before beginning negotiations. It is in everyone's interest to preserve economic relationships and make Britain's exit as smooth as possible.

Fourth, when the Brexit trigger is pulled is a political, not legal issue. The referendum was advisory. No enabling legislation has been passed. A Leave majority does not exist in Parliament. The existing government and opposition backed staying. Effective negotiations won't be possible until a government, backed by a stable majority, is prepared to act. Even a new government might want to move slowly, perhaps empaneling a commission of worthies to work through the complicated issues, followed by a public discussion. Indeed, with the Conservatives so badly split while enjoying only a small majority, a new election might be necessary.

Fifth, waiting would increase London's bargaining power. EU officials are divided over Brexit's timing. Everyone would like to resolve the UK's status to promote economic as well as political stability. However, since negotiations most likely will take years, even starting now would have no impact until well into the future. The Eurocrats understand that accelerating the process would put greater pressure on London to make concessions, since a shorter deadline would threaten to leave the UK outside of the EU without any special access to the European market. However, Britain can play the same game by delaying.

Sixth, as passions cool the desire to exact revenge — to punish Britain to discourage other exiters — likely will fade. German Chancellor Angela Merkel differed from her colleagues, indicating that there is “no reason to be in a way especially nasty during the negotiations.” While punitive measures might provide emotional satisfaction for some, failing to reach an agreement with the world's fifth and Europe's second largest economy would hurt everyone. Continued commercial links between the UK and continent are too important to sacrifice in a fit of pique. Ironically, a vengeful, arbitrary Brussels would reinforce the very behavior which has generated popular antipathy. In the meantime London could begin informal chats with other governments in an attempt to build support for a smoother exit.

Seventh, slowing the process would give Washington more time to play a positive role. It should start by indicating its willingness to begin negotiations with the UK over a free trade agreement as soon as the Brits are ready. The U.S. also should indicate that a smoother UK-EU divorce would improve the chances of a U.S.-EU trade pact. The last thing America wants is intra-European hostilities.

Eighth, holding off on the official trigger creates at least a possibility of rapprochement between the UK and EU. Brexit just might shock Europe's leading powers toward serious reforms — blocking further political unification, ensuring democratic accountability, and protecting national sovereignty, for instance. Although a few deluded EU officials speak of accelerating and deepening European integration — “more Europe,” as they say — German Finance Minister

Wolfgang Schäuble called the idea “crazy” after the British vote. Donald Tusk, one of the EU’s many presidents (of the European Council), admitted that “ordinary people, the citizens of Europe, do not share our Euro-enthusiasm.” Even a “two-speed” Europe with countries agreeing to different degrees of integration appears far-fetched with populism on the rise across the continent.

The EU will have to work to regain public trust and support. If successful, the EU might even change attitudes in the UK. After all, upcoming elections in several nations could dramatically change the continent’s political climate. Even the French economy minister Emmanuel Macron proposed “to organize a true European referendum in its real sense” on a “new project” and “road map.” That would be unprecedented.

The ultimate impact of Brexit remains to be seen. Much of Europe is aflame, with the political center contracting in one country after another.

In such a world, all parties should allow the passions political battle to cool. Pressure from Brussels on the Cameron government is empty: neither the EU nor other member states can force London to leave. The UK likely will voluntarily yield its turn next year at the rotating Council presidency. The majority could exclude British officials from meetings; the Commission could fire British staff. But London still need not prematurely trigger Brexit.

In fact, slowing down the process would benefit Europe as well as the UK. A hasty, angry negotiation would serve no one. The British vote could change the EU for the better. There’s no need to hurry Brexit.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.*