

A: Hello, I'm Chris Fraser. Today on BBC World Service I'm in the studio with Katya Adler, who is the BBC Europe editor. I'm asking her to think back to the morning of the first of February 2020. She was in Brussels, and the United Kingdom had left the European Union at midnight on January 31st, a few hours before. Katya, you said in your report then that you had a mixture of emotions on that day?

B: Yes, Chris. I had stood in the same place many times in the previous four years, trying to explain the EU perspective on Brexit following the British referendum, and throughout the divorce negotiations. It struck me that the European Commission building behind me, a huge impersonal glass and concrete office block, embodies the idea many in the UK have of the EU as a whole.

A: Did you have a sense of how ordinary Europeans felt about Britain leaving?

B: Yes, there were so many - engineers, teachers, bus drivers - who asked me "Why are you doing this?" and said "Don't leave!" Though never very enthusiastic about the EU, the UK was part of the European project for almost half a century.

A: How do you think Britain was thought of while in the EU?

B: Behind the scenes, Britain was known for playing a big part in some of Europe's most ambitious projects - the single market, the single currency (even though the UK finally never joined) -, and perhaps most of all, the enlargement eastward to include the former communist countries. And they did sometimes like the British sense of humor!

A: I guess they appreciated the many billions that Britain paid in to the European budget also - which they will greatly miss, I think.

B: Yes. I also remember thinking back then, that the trade talks which were to come, with Britain of course trying to negotiate the best possible deal, were going to be difficult. The President of the European Parliament said that the EU would always act with a sense of "brotherhood" towards the UK. But the problem with families, brothers and sisters, is that when there is a disagreement it can cause very deep divisions. So the trade talks were always going to be complicated.

A: But Brexit was about much more than business and economics, wasn't it? We all know how close the vote was on the referendum - but the reality is that more than half the British voters did not identify with Europe at all. They wanted out.

B: That's true. Some people in Brussels were very defensive about Brexit, because they saw it as a significant failure. The EU was unable, or unwilling, to find a way to persuade Britain to stay. Maybe they should have made more concessions to British Prime Minister David Cameron, to help his Remain campaign.

A: Do the European leaders believe that anything good has come from Brexit, from their standpoint?

B: The European Commission President, Ursula von der Leyen, told me she was actually very emotional about the UK's departure in January. She said Brexit had had a very positive effect on the rest of the EU, and thought it had helped to unify the member states. They realized that if they were going to have successful negotiations with Britain, they all needed to stick together and maintain a united front.

A: What did Michel Barnier think about all this? He was the EU lead negotiator, and had to battle away for long months to try to reach an agreement. He must have been sick of the British by the end!

B He too said Brussels had lessons to learn. For example, he said many regions similar to the North East of England felt underfunded and overlooked. They also believe that the EU has not protected them from the effects of globalization. He said the EU should listen more to European voters.

A: I think we all agree with that! Euroscepticism is still strong across the EU, though the temptation to leave the bloc which we saw in 2016 in France and Italy has just about disappeared.

B: That's true, but if Brexit is a success, other countries might still be tempted to follow!

Summary

This discussion concerns Brexit; it recounts the experience of a BBC journalist who reported on the process. She gives some personal impressions, and also reports reactions from leading figures in the EU. Some positives and negatives concerning Britain's departure are considered, but the dialogue raises the question of the great potential difficulty in the ongoing negotiations concerning Britain's future relationship with Europe.

Questions

1. What is your impression of the current situation between Britain and Europe?
2. Do you think the EU is actually better off now that the UK has left?
3. Could you envisage Britain returning to the EU at some point in the future?
4. Do you think that after Brexit, Britain is a more attractive or less attractive place to work?