

Speech by Michel Barnier at the “Churchill Europe Symposium”

**“Brexit: new realities and lessons learned for Europe”**

Zurich, 31 March 2021

*Check against delivery*

**[INTRODUCTION]**

Federal Councillor, dear Ignazio Cassis,

Dear Professor Andreas Kellerhals,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for this warm welcome.

I am sorry we cannot be together physically in Zurich today – for reasons we have all grown too familiar with.

We all have experience now with video technology.

I had multiple rounds of negotiations with David Frost like this. And, in the end, we managed to conclude an agreement.

Although I am still not entirely sure we understood each other all the time.

But that’s perhaps not so much about the video technology, as it is about our views on Europe and on the sharing national sovereignty.

Anyway, it is a pleasure to be with you this evening.

Especially on this special day for me.

My last day at the European Commission.

After two mandates as a European Commissioner

And four-and-a-half years working on Brexit.

So, it is the perfect day to look back at this experience as Brexit Chief Negotiator.

And to reflect on the lessons of this extraordinary negotiation.

But first, let me say a word on where we are now.

### **[NEW REALITIES]**

As you know, the UK left the EU Single Market and Customs Union on 31 December 2020.  
After having left the EU on 31 January 2020.

Since the referendum of 23 June 2016, there were many slogans:

- “Take back control”
- “Get Brexit done”
- “Global Britain”

But until now, these slogans were never put to the test.

As the “economic” Brexit had not yet taken effect.

In fact, for many people, the real consequences of the referendum are only now starting to sink in.

And it turns out: Brexit really did mean Brexit.

- You cannot renounce the obligations of a Member State and of the Single Market;
- Leave behind an open market based on an ecosystem of common rules, standards and a jurisdiction;
- And still maintain the benefits and advantages of the EU and of the Single Market and Customs Union membership.

The reality, which has today become clear for all to see, is that:

- Brexit means recreating trade barriers that had not existed for 47 years.
  - Customs formalities for all goods exchanged between the UK and the EU;
  - Administrative burdens for traders and logistics and distribution operators;
  - Disruptions to long-established value and supply chains.
- Brexit means stopping citizens from moving freely between the EU and the UK to study, work or retire.
- For the UK, Brexit also means renegotiating trade relationships with other global partners. As a country of 66 million people, rather than as a bloc of more than 500 million.

These new realities, and the concrete problems they pose – from difficulties for UK fishermen to sell their products in the EU to impediments to the mobility of musicians – do not result from EU decisions.

They are the direct, automatic, consequences of the UK's choice to leave the Union, the Single Market and the Customs Union.

You do not have to take my word for it. Let me quote you one title of a podcast and one finding from a report from the UK:

- *“Drowning in red tape? UK business, trade and Brexit”*, asked the UK Trade Policy Observatory from the University of Sussex;
- *“Brexit has already been a disaster for British Trade”*, says the Centre for European Reform, with analysis showing that leaving the EU's single market and customs union led total UK goods trade to fall by 22 per cent, compared to a modelled Britain that remained within the single market and customs union in January 2021.

These are all consequences that we have explained and encouraged stakeholders to prepare for ever since the 2016 referendum.

In particular, in more than 100 notices that the Commission published to explain, sector by sector, the consequences of Brexit.

Such changes were inevitable.

But many more difficulties were avoided over the last 4.5 years.

- The Withdrawal Agreement allowed for the UK's orderly withdrawal from the EU.
- And the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which provisionally applies since 1 January 2021 pending ratification, established a broad new relationship between the EU and the UK.

These two treaties now need to be rigorously implemented, in full respect of commitments taken and each side's signature.

Because that is the best and only responsible way forward. The essential condition to make good on the promise of a worthy and prosperous future partnership.

These agreements represent in fact both a relief and a great achievement.

They are the "new normal" for UK businesses.

As I look back at these long negotiations, let me try to summarise these achievements through **five key words**.

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## **[I – RESPECT]**

The first word is **respect**.

Over the last five years, I have often told the story of my first vote as a French citizen.

It was in 1972, and there was a referendum in France about the accession to the European Communities of the UK, along with Ireland, Denmark and Norway.

I was a member of the Gaullist party.

Yet I campaigned for the “yes”.

Because I thought that we would be stronger together.

But also because I had always admired the UK, its history, its culture and its political leaders.

Including of course Winston Churchill who showed in his famous 1946 speech at the University of Zurich that he had a vision, not only for Britain, but also for Europe and the world.

I never regretted this vote.

- The UK played a key role in developing the EU project and its Single Market.
- And the UK also strongly benefited from being an EU member.

So, when 52% of voters in the UK chose to leave the EU, I regretted this decision.

But I have always respected it.

And since I was appointed as the EU’s Chief Negotiator, I have always treated the UK with respect. Without aggressiveness. Or any spirit of revenge.

- It is with respect that we engaged with the negotiators designated by the UK government.
- It is with respect that we negotiated the UK’s orderly withdrawal from the EU.
- It is with respect that we took note of the UK’s choices to leave the Single Market and Customs Union.
- And it is with respect that we engaged in a second negotiation, on the new relationship between the EU and the UK.

## **[II – UNITY]**

Ladies and gentlemen,

We would not have concluded this negotiation without having profound respect for the UK.

But we would not have succeeded either without standing united in the EU.

**Unity** is therefore my second key word.

As the EU's Chief Negotiator, I had the privilege of working with a truly exceptional team.

Together, we enjoyed the full trust of:

- Former Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and, then, President Ursula von der Leyen,
- Former Council President Donald Tusk and, then, Charles Michel,
- 27 united Member States,
- and the European Parliament, first with Martin Schulz, Antonio Tajani, then with David Sassoli.

But unity does not fall from heaven, in particular in difficult negotiations such as these. We had to build this trust.

- To do so, we worked hand in hand, week after week, with:
  - the elected representatives in the European Parliament,
  - 27 Brexit delegates in the Council,
  - Ministers and members of national parliaments in the Member States.
- We ensured an exceptionally high level of transparency in the negotiation.
- We clearly explained our positions to all those affected
  - citizens, businesses, trade unions, public administrations,
  - but also academics, think tanks, NGOs and journalists.
- And we encouraged a genuine public debate on Brexit:
  - On how it would affect the EU and the UK,
  - and in particular Ireland and Northern Ireland, given the specific challenges there created by Brexit.

This method was the right one.

Because it left no stone unturned.

Individual problems were identified, analysed and discussed.

The border on the island of Ireland, the UK sovereign bases in Cyprus, fisheries, transport, Gibraltar:

All national difficulties were reflected in united EU positions.

**The unity was not just a question of a method. It was also the expression by heads of state and government of the value they attach to the European Union.**

These are difficult times for the EU, but I find hope in that commitment of European Council members.

### **[III – RESPONSIBILITY]**

With trust comes great **responsibility**. This is my third key word.

Our first responsibility was to negotiate an orderly UK withdrawal.

To avoid the most negative consequences of Brexit.

The Withdrawal Agreement ensured a smooth winding-down of procedures that were ongoing on 1 February 2020.

It allows for the continued protection of existing intellectual property rights and geographical indications.

Above all, it removes three major uncertainties.

First, **it safeguards – for life – the rights of all EU citizens** living in the UK and UK nationals living in the EU before 31 December 2020.

- As well as those of their family members.
- Thanks to this, some 4.5 million citizens can continue to live, study and work in their respective host States.

- With their rights to healthcare, pensions and other social security benefits secured for the rest of their lives.

Second, **the Withdrawal Agreement settles all financial obligations** undertaken while the UK was a member of the Union.

- Thanks to this, all projects and programmes supported by the EU budgetary framework for 2014-2020 can continue as planned.
- With UK beneficiaries continuing to participate and receive funding until the closure of these projects and programmes.

Third, **the Withdrawal Agreement includes a solution to deal with the specific situation of Northern Ireland,**

- where the Brexit negotiations were not just about cross-border trade and the economy,
- but, more existentially, about maintaining peace and stability, given that Brexit would have created a border on the island of Ireland.

Finding common ground with the UK on how to achieve a solution to this problem was, as you know, not easy.

- But the EU was tireless in its efforts.
- We listened to concerns in Ireland, Northern Ireland and across the UK.
- We went back to the drawing board many times to find a solution that would reconcile the many different interests at play.
- First with Prime Minister Theresa May, then with Boris Johnson.

In the end, we managed to square the circle:

- Avoiding a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland;
- Preserving the all-island economy and respecting the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement in all its dimensions;
- Protecting the EU's Single Market, and all its guarantees for consumer protection, public and animal health.



- And respecting the place of Northern Ireland as an integral part of the United Kingdom's internal market.

This agreement took us two years to reach.

It is a balanced and delicate compromise.

It is now of the utmost importance that it is thoroughly applied by each party.

Including by putting in place the necessary checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

As we agree that there can be no checks across the island of Ireland.

It is important the both the EU and the UK live up to their commitment; that they explain their commitment to NI.

#### **[IV – AMBITION]**

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Withdrawal Agreement settled all aspects of the UK's divorce from the EU.

But we still had to agree on our future relation.

For this, we needed **ambition** – which is my fourth key word.

As the UK refused to extend the transition period, we only had 11 months to negotiate this future relation. This is extremely short.

- To give you an example, our negotiations for free trade agreements with Canada or Japan, for instance, took at least 5 years to conclude.
- And they were far more narrow in scope than our negotiations with the UK.

Our Trade and Cooperation agreement with the UK is far broader. It covers four pillars.

### 1) First, a **free trade agreement that is ambitious and fair**

- Zero tariffs, zero quotas, for all goods exchanged.
- In addition to goods, we cover services and investment, digital trade, maritime services, intellectual property and SMEs.
- At the heart of this free trade agreement are a set of new rules aimed at ensuring a more modern, fairer, more sustainable trade policy:
  - A trade policy that does not only aim to offer more choice at lower prices;
  - but that seeks a fair treatment of workers and decent working conditions;
  - that respects the safety and health of consumers;
  - and that protects our environment and climate in the long term.
- The “level playing field” was particularly necessary with such a close neighbour, whose economy is so interconnected with ours.

### 2) The second pillar of our agreement **provides for ambitious economic and social cooperation** in a large number of sectors:

- Air and road transport;
- Energy;
- Climate change, with ambitious targets on decarbonisation;
- Fisheries;
- Our agreement also includes provisions for continued collaboration on research and innovation, nuclear safety and space, within the framework of our world-leading Union programmes;
- As well as an important clause on non-discrimination between EU citizens with regard to short-term visas and social security coordination.

### 3) The third pillar of our agreement concerns **our citizens’ security**

- The fight against crime and terrorism requires close cooperation between the EU and the UK.
- This cooperation can no longer take place using our existing EU tools.

- But we agreed to cooperate in key domains, for instance on surrender, or on exchanging DNA, fingerprints and vehicle registration data, as well as criminal record information.
- This cooperation – and we insisted a lot on this – is subject to robust guarantees on the protection of fundamental rights and on the respect of personal data.

4) The fourth pillar of our agreement consists of **common governance rules to ensure that our partnership is effective and credible in the long term.**

- A joint Partnership Council, composed of representatives of the EU and the UK, will act as a forum for political dialogue and consultation.
- If a solution to a disagreement cannot be found, an independent arbitration tribunal can be established to settle the matter through a binding ruling.
- We also have agreed on credible and robust enforcement and safeguard mechanisms, including the possibility to suspend market access commitments, e.g. by reintroducing tariffs and/or quotas in the affected sector.
- Of course, our aim is not to be forced to apply these measures.
- But to anchor our cooperation in a stable and sustainable agreement, which is both ambitious and realistic.

On this agreement, we finally cut a deal on Christmas Eve last year – just 7 days before the end of the transition period.

Of course, this deal could have been even broader. In particular:

- I regret that the UK government chose not to participate in the Erasmus student exchange programme.
- That it did not accept to include clauses on citizens' mobility; and non-discrimination between all our EU nationals. All EU nationals are equals for the EU, no longer for the UK.
- And that, in an uncertain and unstable world, it did not wish to negotiate an agreement on foreign policy, external security, defence or development cooperation.

But overall, reaching such an ambitious and realistic agreement in such little time is a great achievement.

## [V – EUROPE]

Ladies and gentlemen,

As I have said in the beginning of this speech, our agreement does not replicate the benefits of the EU and its Single Market.

These brings me to my fifth key word: **Europe**.

Throughout the negotiation process, we protected the EU and its Single Market.

And it worked.

Contrary to what many predicted at the time of the UK referendum:

- Brexit did not trigger the demise of the European Union,
- But rather its reawakening.
- A realisation that our unity – our Single Market, our common policies – are what give us scale and clout on the global stage.
- That pooling our sovereignty where it matters most is exactly what has enabled us to continue promoting our shared interests and values in this fast-changing world.

The first months of 2021, however, did not always make that clear to public opinion.

A word in this context on the pandemic and vaccines.

It is true that the UK has a quicker vaccination rate compared to the EU.

But the fight against COVID 19 is more than speed of vaccination, important as that is. We will need to draw lessons very soon on the economic policies for recovery.

On restricting civil liberties for the sake of fighting a pandemic.

On how to get going again with our daily lives and priorities for the future.

We will all find strong and weaker points in how we managed this. But there is no place, in such a serious situation, for polemics and competition.

There are so many more reasons to cooperate, in the short and the long term.

In all this, there are of course also lessons to be learnt from Brexit.

Some of the lessons of Brexit are probably specific to the UK. But others are common to many other regions across Europe.

- The feeling that Europe does not listen enough or is too distant.
- That austerity went too far in the last decade.
- That Europe does not protect its citizens or act decisively enough against the negative consequences of globalisation.
- That it has let some of its industries collapse, and done too little to anticipate technological change or to help create new, decent jobs.

Everywhere in Europe, we should listen to the popular feeling, which is not the same as populism.

Everywhere, we need to show that Europe works for its citizens.

This is the sense of recent initiatives taken by the European Commission and its President Ursula von der Leyen.

- To deepen our Single Market and bring it into the digital age,
- To help fuel Europe's economic recovery – with the historic, 750 billion euro *NextGenerationEU* programme – and to create new, fairer opportunities for all Europeans.
- To launch a 'European Green Deal' putting the EU on the path to climate neutrality by 2050, while ensuring that no one is left behind in this generational transition.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The 21<sup>st</sup> century will inevitably continue to bring its share of global challenges and changes. Some of which will have profound impact on our daily lives.

The European Union will never be the answer to all problems. But EU policies can help solve problems.

Only by working together at all levels, by strengthening the “European fabric” – to use the words pronounced here by Churchill 75 years ago – can we make sure that Europe is up to the pressing task of today’s world.

And, perhaps more importantly, make sure that Europe lives up to the expectations of future generations.

Together, we can build a European Union that not only protects but also inspires.

A European Union that cooperates closely with its friends and allies – as we do with our friends here in Switzerland.

And a European Union that continues to make us stronger together.

*In short, a Europe that Europeans would never dream of leaving behind.*