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The Henry Mance Interview Michel Barnier

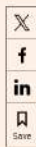
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Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier: 'The EU is not the same one the UK left'

French politician says British ministers did not know the consequences of leaving the bloc



Portraits by Charlie Bibby



Henry Mance 13 HOURS AGO

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Michel Barnier arrives, carrying, of course, two folders full of papers. Tall and debonair, the former Brexit negotiator knows the power of appearances.

During the talks, he cultivated an air of principled authority. Remainers saw him as a voice of reason; even Brexiters developed a grudging respect. "I wish we could employ him," said a frustrated Nigel Farage. Barnier kept his head while his British counterparts were losing theirs and blaming it on him.

"I'm not always calm — listen to my wife or children — but I decided at the very beginning to be calm. I knew it could be a weakness to be French, and I knew that I would be in the fire of the tabloids. They were waiting for me to get angry. They tried several times."

Barnier was mellowed by age and hikes in the French Alps. In 2020, some British newspapers suggested he might have been Downing Street's Covid "patient zero" who infected Prime Minister Boris Johnson. He swallowed his fury.

So the 72-year-old's career is bookended by two achievements: organising the 1992 Albertville Winter Olympics, which he mentions surprisingly frequently, and negotiating Brexit. Albertville was positive, Brexit was negative, he says. And the UK didn't win in either, I suggest. Barnier doesn't rise to the joke.

"Winning for the UK in the Winter Olympics is more difficult than in the

Training for the 2024 Paris Olympics is more difficult than in the Summer Olympics," he says, with predictable calm.

But, like David Cameron, the former UK prime minister who returned to frontline politics last week, Barnier is not finished. He tried and failed to become the centre-right candidate in the 2022 French presidential election. Now he is urging the centre-right to unify to stave off Marine Le Pen.



In doing so, he has disappointed his old colleagues in Brussels and those who saw him as the face of unbendable EU principles. Ahead of the 2022 election, the two-time former EU commissioner claimed immigration was "out of control". He suggested France should suspend all immigration from non-EU countries for three to five years.

Critics say Barnier has joined the populist wave he once scorned. He retorts: "I have been European before them, and I will remain European after them!"

He blames the European Court of Justice for reducing states' freedom to act in the name of national security and expanding migrants' rights to bring family members: "You can find nothing in the French constitution about migration, and there is almost nothing in the European treaties. For 30 or 40 years, there's a kind of interpretation that is always in favour of the migrants... We have to rewrite something in the [EU] treaties or in the [European Convention of Human Rights]."

So he is hoping to reform the EU, like Cameron in 2015? "We have to provoke a discussion at the European level... During this time, we have to create a constitutional shield [allowing national law to take precedence], and to ask the French people to decide." In other words, a referendum, including the creation of annual immigration quotas.

Maybe Barnier liked Brexit so much he has decided to repeat the experience. He insists the opposite. "If we don't do that — as Brexit was improbable and happened — something in France which is improbable could happen: the election of Ms Le Pen as president."

He adds, grandiosely: "I'm the only one in France perhaps to know exactly why the Brexit happened."

In the two and a half years since he stepped down from Brexit duties, the issue has slid down the EU's agenda. Yet in the UK, it remains unresolved. In the latest polls, 57 per cent of the public [say](#) it was wrong to leave; 33 per cent think it was right. By a margin of 58 per cent to 42 per cent, they [say](#) they would vote to rejoin the EU.

"It seems to me that Brexit is an issue of permanent debate in the UK. That means Brexit was not so clear," observes Barnier. "From the very first day, the UK ministers not only underestimated the consequences of Brexit — they *did not know* the consequences of Brexit."

He dismisses a promise by shadow foreign secretary David Lammy to go through the UK-EU trade agreement "page by page" if Labour is elected: "Good luck!" But he is warm to Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer, who wants [closer relations](#), albeit while staying outside the single market and customs union. "I think Starmer is a European like me — a patriot and European."

A 2018 entry in Barnier's *My Secret Brexit Diary* describes Starmer as the British politician "who impresses me the most for his ability to grasp in detail what is at stake in Brexit negotiations... I get the feeling that Keir Starmer will one day be UK prime minister."

Starmer's plan, which includes a UK-EU veterinary agreement, "seems to be pragmatic and possible". Barnier would like him to go further, including a UK-EU defence treaty and joint road map for peace in the Middle East. "We have — France and the UK in particular, but also Italy, Spain and some others — a historic responsibility."

Barnier is quick to detail the UK's previous negotiating mistakes. He spent the nine months before Brexit talks began in June 2017 preparing with his team: "I do not think the UK did the same." The UK's first Brexit secretary, David Davis, suggested London could keep the headquarters of two key regulators. "Totally impossible! It seems to me a huge weakness: to take your desires for reality."

Then there was Theresa May ruling out customs union and single market membership from the outset (Barnier was "astonished"), and Boris Johnson committing to leave the EU on a set date. "It was a huge mistake. He had no time."

When Jeremy Hunt, as foreign secretary, likened the EU to the USSR, Barnier wrote in his diary: "What's the point of arguing with Jeremy Hunt?" He was friendly with Davis, a garrulous politician like himself, but lost all trust in David Frost, Johnson's aggressive Brexit negotiator, for threatening to break the divorce treaty he had just agreed.

Did Barnier ever believe there would be a no-deal Brexit? "Yes, when Theresa May failed a third time to get an agreement in the House of Commons." But under Johnson, no-deal seemed a bluff. "Johnson said once, 'I want a deal because I need a deal.' This sentence was key for me . . . I wasn't surprised by the madman strategy. I was told that this strategy was taught in university in the UK."

Barnier's approach was methodical. As a teenager, he wrote to Georges Pompidou after his ousting as French prime minister, and received a personal reply. From then on, he resolved to respond to every letter he received. Similarly, he met endlessly with legislators over Brexit, while leaving the policy alog to his team, especially his deputy, [Sabine Weyand](#). "He made a lot of people feel very important," says one observer.

Crucially, Barnier kept the EU unified, convincing 27 member states that sticking together was the best way to protect their own specific interests. Only about eight states, for example, had a direct interest in fisheries: "Ms Merkel told me several times, 'It's not so important for us, but I understand it's important for Mr Macron.'"

"The British did not understand. They tried every week to divide us. I visited one capital every week: the day before I came, there was a British minister, and the day after. Which is incredible. Losing time!" *La méthode Barnier* is now established as a way for the European Commission to handle external negotiations on behalf of member states and its parliament.

In February, the UK and EU agreed the Windsor framework to reduce checks on goods crossing the Irish Sea. Does it show Barnier was too inflexible on this issue? He attributes the compromise to Rishi Sunak being "more pragmatic and serious" than Johnson. The changed context given the Ukraine war perhaps also played a role.

What about rules of origin for electric cars? The commission is considering [postponing](#) tariffs on sales of cars between the EU and UK. Barnier is "not in favour of any type of flexibility", worrying it would set a precedent. "I'm ready to be very vocal on this point . . . What is said about rules of origin could be said about financial services and equivalence. [Britain] lost the financial passport: there will be no flexibility."

Listening to Barnier, I am reminded of the joke about a French bureaucrat who asks of a policy idea: it works in practice, but does it work in theory?

"I have no spirit of revenge, no spirit of punishment — never — just to protect what is our main asset and perhaps our single asset: the single market. The only reason that Mr Biden and the Chinese president respect us is the single market."

He says there is "no room [for] any manoeuvre [on] any reopening of the EU-UK trade agreement", given Starmer's red lines, although "it's always possible to improve the functioning of this agreement, on some technical points".

One of Barnier's regrets is that the UK left the Erasmus student exchange scheme. Would rejoining be a way for Starmer to rebuild trust? "The door is open, particularly for Erasmus."

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Would Le Pen take France out of the EU? Barnier points out that she celebrated Brexit as a “victory”. “She’s able, like Farage, to hide what she wants to do. But I think she didn’t change [her view].”

The EU has started to confront populism, he argues, noting the hiring of 10,000 border guards and the use of joint borrowing to create a Covid recovery fund. “The EU today is no longer the EU that the UK left. We have begun to draw the lessons of Brexit.”

Yet the bloc is hamstrung by [Franco-German stalemate](#). “This co-operation has never been easy, except for one time when the leaders were friends, [Valéry] Giscard [d’Estaing] and [Helmut] Schmidt.”

He is hopeful about Poland’s role under Donald Tusk. He supports Ukrainian membership of the EU, but thinks it should wait until it has become “acceptable” to the bloc’s public. He also supports Emmanuel Macron’s idea of a European political community, which could offer a framework for closer relations with non-members like the UK.

Barnier, who was first elected to public office 50 years ago, wants his party Les Républicains, Macron’s Renaissance and others to coalesce behind a single, centre-right candidate for the presidency in 2027. Could it be him? “That’s not the issue now,” he says, briefly flustered. I insist. “It’s not a question of people for the moment.” On this point, at least, Barnier may see room for flexibility.



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Gobsmacked old man 14 MINUTES AGO

"They did not know" has always amazed me most about the whole Brexit brigade: they really give the impression that they didn't have the slightest clue of how the single market and the customs union operate, or that Merkel and BMW were never going to deliver a sweetheart deal, etc, etc. Renegotiating the TCA in 2025 will not be possible, as Barnier makes clear here. Is anyone in London listening?

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