



As Frost departs, will the ice melt across the Channel?

by Charles Grant, 20 December 2021

David Frost's resignation as Brexit minister matters: he greatly influenced Boris Johnson's Brexit policy. With Liz Truss replacing him, UK policy towards the EU may become less confrontational.

Not long ago I was asked by a Commission official who on the British side mattered in the Brexit negotiations, apart from David Frost and the prime minister. My answer was almost nobody else. On certain issues the cabinet secretary or a particular adviser might be consulted. But on most of the key decisions in the Brexit negotiations, Frost's views were paramount, alongside those of Boris Johnson. Few other cabinet ministers have played much of a role in the Brexit talks, particularly since Frost – chief Brexit negotiator since June 2019, and a life peer since August 2020 – was promoted to the cabinet in March 2021.

Frost, like Johnson and most of the European Research Group (ERG) Tories in Parliament, wanted [a sovereignty-first Brexit](#) that maximised regulatory freedom, without worrying too much about the economic consequences, and he achieved it. Frost influenced not only the substance of the Brexit talks but also their style. He was an advocate of the 'thump'em' school of diplomacy, believing that acting tough gets better results; he said that Theresa May's Brexit deal suffered from her negotiators being too accommodating. My own view is that diplomacy usually achieves more if you retain or generate some good will on the other side. But Frost's supporters point to the Commission's October proposals to improve the working of the Northern Ireland protocol: they think the Commission would not have made such a generous offer without being scared that the UK would invoke the protocol's Article 16, which could lead to the UK renouncing that document altogether.

Frost made himself an extraordinarily unpopular figure in Brussels and in EU capitals. EU officials shake their heads when they quote his speech to the October Conservative Party Conference, in which he spoke of Britain awakening from the "long bad dream" of EU membership. Visiting Brussels three weeks ago, I was told that relations with the UK could not improve so long as Frost remained in post. Officials lamented Michael Gove's removal from the negotiations on the Northern Ireland protocol (at the same time that Frost became a cabinet minister), for Gove had displayed diplomatic skills and built a constructive relationship with Maroš Šefčovič, the commissioner who leads on the EU side.

Irish ministers have been even more hostile to Frost than those of other member-states. They consider that he deliberately stirred up anger among Unionists towards the protocol, to strengthen his negotiating hand with the EU. They regard this as unforgiveable behaviour, since it risks undermining the peace process. Frost denies any such stirring. And while Dublin and Brussels reckon the British government has unduly favoured the Unionist viewpoint, because of the Tories' longstanding ties to the Democratic Unionist Party, Frost has been right to point out that many people on the EU side have paid insufficient attention to Unionist concerns, notably their fears of being cut off from Great Britain and subsumed into the republic.

British business leaders will also be happy about Frost's departure. Many of them claim that he rarely met them, and that when he did, he did not listen. Other senior cabinet ministers, like Rishi Sunak and Michael Gove, have paid a bit more attention to what businesses say; both recently argued against invoking Article 16. My guess is that Gove and Sunak are not shedding too many tears about Frost's departure either.

The last time I spoke to Frost, more than a year ago, he acknowledged that Brexit would bring with it short-term economic costs, but he thought the UK would do fine in the medium and long term. In recent months, he seems to have become worried that the long-term benefits would not be realised unless Johnson pursued neo-Thatcherite policies of low taxation and deregulation; hence the importance he attached to Britain winning the freedom to diverge from EU rules.

EU (and French) officials certainly fear that the UK will evolve towards the 'Singapore-on-Thames' model that Frost (and a few other ministers) desire. But the chances of that happening anytime soon are minimal. A majority of Tory MPs and voters do not want much in the way of deregulation or tax cuts if that means lowering social and environmental standards or cutting public services. Johnson is evidently no Thatcherite.

Frost's [resignation letter](#) referred to his concerns about the government's "direction of travel" but did not mention any dissatisfaction over the Brexit process. It cited recent tax rises as one of the reasons behind his decision to leave. Another reason was disapproval of the coercive restrictions imposed because of COVID-19. Apparently a third is his concern that over-zealous efforts to curb carbon emissions could hurt the economy.

It seems odd for the chief Brexit negotiator to focus on such issues in explaining his resignation. However, the middle-of-the-road technocrat has evolved into a politician closely aligned with many of the most right-wing Tory MPs, who tend to want not only a hard Brexit, but also minimal COVID-19 restrictions, lower taxes and less onerous rules on carbon emissions. Frost's interests had extended beyond his core areas of responsibility, and there was speculation that he was developing broader political ambitions. Polling of Tory activists showed him to be among the most popular of ministers.

The extraordinary weakening of Johnson over the past five weeks is surely not irrelevant to Frost's resignation. Johnson has been damaged by his attempt to prevent his friend Owen Paterson MP being punished for breaching lobbying rules; repeated questions about how the renovation of his Downing Street flat was paid for; numerous photos of social events in Downing Street which may have breached COVID-19 lockdown rules; a massive backbench rebellion against COVID-19 restrictions; and the loss of a safe seat in a recent by-election. Frost's power depended on the prime minister's support, so the weakening of Johnson hurt Frost. Yet Frost is now making some of the same implicit criticisms of Johnson that are being made by the Tory right.

In Brussels three weeks ago, when I predicted that the weakening of Johnson would lead to a softer UK line on Brexit, I was contradicted by a European commissioner who told me that Johnson would pick even more fights with Europe in an effort to shore up support. I still think I was right. If the UK invoked Article 16, the EU would give a year's notice that it would suspend most of the Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA). Britain would then face the prospect of a 'no-deal Brexit' and a trade war with Brussels. That is surely an unpalatable prospect for a government with massive medical, economic and political problems on its plate. Which is presumably why in recent weeks the British have given a lot more licenses to French fishing boats, and why they are no longer prioritising the complete removal of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) from the governance of the Northern Ireland protocol. The government has briefed that Frost supported the shift on the ECJ, but one wonders if he was really happy with the softer approach to Brexit.

Liz Truss, the Foreign Secretary and a rising star of the Tory party, will take on Frost's responsibilities in addition to her current job. She has experience of negotiation, having been Trade Secretary, but her style is less confrontational than Frost's. She is one of the few ministers in government who, like Frost, subscribes to a Thatcherite world view.

How eurosceptic is Truss? I know her only slightly, but when I first met her, many years before the Brexit referendum, she assured me she was very eurosceptic. So I was a little surprised when in 2016 she came out for Remain, and she argued eloquently for that cause. Immediately after the vote, however, with all the zeal of a convert, she became an enthusiastic advocate of the benefits of Brexit. As Trade Secretary she emphasised the importance of 'global Britain' striking its own trade deals, and as Foreign Secretary she has made a point of saying very little about the EU. As someone who doesn't hide her ambition to be the next Conservative leader, she will want to appear tough in dealing with the EU, in order to secure the support of the party's right. But she may well consider it in her political interest to demonstrate that she can strike a successful deal with the EU on the protocol.

I doubt Truss will enjoy Frost's power and authority over the UK's approach in Brexit talks, for four reasons. First, she lacks the close personal bond with Johnson that Frost had formed. Second, she is not an EU expert, and Frost is. Third, unlike Frost, she is not naturally a politician who likes to delve into the detail. And fourth, being Foreign Secretary is already a full-time job that will demand a lot of her attention.

Chris Heaton-Harris has been appointed her deputy on Brexit issues. A longstanding advocate of Leave, a former chair of the ERG and a one-time MEP, his presence will reassure those Brexiteers who think that Truss may be suspect because she voted Remain. He is one of the more thoughtful and pragmatic Leavers, which is why the CER has been happy to have him [speaking on its platform](#).

The prime minister is sufficiently flexible to accommodate a softer line on the EU if he thinks that will help him politically. But even if that does happen, or another Conservative becomes prime minister (such as Sunak, Truss or Jeremy Hunt), or if Labour's Keir Starmer takes over, the fundamentals of the Johnson-Frost Brexit deal are likely to endure: the UK will stay out of the single market and the customs union, and not restore freedom of movement. What could happen, post-Frost, would be a softening of the rougher edges of the TCA, such as an agreement on plant and animal health to reduce border frictions, a deal on mobility so that workers don't need visas for short trips to the EU, and some sort of framework to facilitate co-operation on foreign policy.

Frost's departure makes a compromise on the operation of the Northern Ireland protocol more likely, for he seemed to have a personal animus against that document. This may go back to its origins: in the

autumn of 2019, Frost was an advocate of ‘alternative arrangements’, the idea that very clever technology could obviate the need for physical controls or infrastructure on the border between Northern Ireland and the republic. Thus Brexit could be combined with an almost invisible border on the island of Ireland, and no border at all between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The problem was that the technology was not viable. And when Leo Varadkar, the Irish Taoiseach, went for a walk with Johnson in Cheshire, he persuaded him to accept that there should be no border between the two parts of Ireland, and to instead control goods crossing the Irish Sea. Johnson then had to over-rule Frost to push through the Northern Ireland protocol.

Of course, Johnson (and Truss) could try to continue with Frost-like policies for a while. The Prime Minister certainly worries about the ‘Spartan’ MPs in the ERG, who damaged Theresa May and could hurt him. But it is more likely he will try to avoid new fights with Brussels. Being weak at home, he needs to focus on survival, and the pandemic. If he has got any sense he will park Europe on one side. In recent weeks Johnson apparently toyed with the idea of fighting the next general election on the theme of saving Brexit. But the loss of the by-election in the Leave-supporting seat of North Shropshire shows that he can no longer rely on Brexit to be a vote winner. Britain’s erstwhile EU partners will be relieved.

Why is David Frost a Eurosceptic?

The biggest mystery about David Frost is where his euroscepticism comes from. I knew him quite well in the first decade of the century, when he was a fairly senior diplomat in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) – head of the EU department, ambassador in Copenhagen and head of policy planning. He never said anything that made me think he was a eurosceptic and I do not believe he was then. Former colleagues of that period recall a diplomat who was hard-working, dour, intelligent, a little unoriginal, sometimes stubborn and prone to come up with very complex solutions to problems – but never a eurosceptic.

Frost has told friends that towards the end of his time in the FCO he became disillusioned with the EU institutions. But he left the FCO in 2010, and two weeks before the 2016 Brexit referendum, when he worked for the Scotch Whisky Association, he wrote [an essay](#) containing strong arguments for the UK to remain in the EU. A few quotes give a flavour of his thinking at that time: “In short, even the best case outcome [of Brexit negotiations] cannot be as good as what we have now, and we won’t be able to negotiate the best outcome anyway, because in real life you never can.” Or: “Britain will be the demandeur so it will be Britain that has to make concessions to get the deal”. Or: “Our interest is to be part of the biggest possible market with the fewest possible barriers. The European single market gives us that. The European free trade agreements give us that. Why would we want to depart from that?”

On Twitter recently I asked why Frost had changed his mind about the EU. Many responded, predictably, that the opportunities of gaining power had motivated him to change his beliefs. A few suggested that he bore a chip on his shoulder, having been patronised (and passed over for the top jobs) by the pro-EU grandees of the FCO. But I reckon genuine conviction is at least part of the story. He clearly believes much of what he says about the EU. And he cares passionately about a lot of other issues, too. I doubt we have heard the last of David Frost.

Charles Grant is director of the CER.