COVERING THE UE FOR 8 YEARS

**Goodbye Brussels: what I learnt in eight years covering the EU**

Outgoing FT bureau chief reflects on a turbulent time, from eurozone crisis to Brexit

Alex Barker Aug 29, 2019

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Brussels wasn’t supposed to make me weep. Not at all. When I arrived in 2011 to join the FT’s four-strong bureau in the city, my job was to cover the intricacies of single market regulation. It never crossed my mind that reporting on the EU would overwhelm me with emotion or leave me physically shaken. But that was what the migration crisis would do.

Nor was I expecting to see seasoned Greek journalists cry during a press conference. Yet who could blame them? Athens was in its post-bailout-referendum slide of 2015, its government adrift, its battered economy taking one more wallop.

Such was the claustrophobic pressure of the eurozone crisis, at one stage tears even came to the eyes of Chancellor Angela Merkel, the politician-survivor of this decade of European upheaval. “Das ist nicht fair,” she told a group of world leaders in late 2011, when pressured to give more money to fund a financial firewall to protect the eurozone’s weakest members from the markets.

Brussels is notorious as a supposed centre of faceless, grey bureaucracy, the dead hand of unelected administration, but it has never really deserved that tag. Here is the spot where the raw, tangled threads of a continent’s politics converge. It’s where sleep-deprived leaders are trapped in summit rooms, sometimes for days. It is where Europe’s hardest problems come to be compressed and crushed until the pressure is so high, in the words of one summit veteran, “the politics turns fluid” — or breaks into the most vivid dramas.

Journalists converging outside the Europa Building in Brussels in June. When he arrived in Brussels, Barker assumed his focus would be ‘the intricacies of single market regulation’, not events that left him physically shaken

Admittedly, this is also where 45,530 “legal acts” were adopted during my eight-year stint — implementing decisions, international agreements, recommendations, large and small. That’s an astonishing rate of 15 a day, more than one for every European Commission official — and a world apart from my previous posting covering politics in Westminster, which moved at a steadier clip.

It can be a bewildering business for journalists and officials alike. In his memoirs, Sir Leslie Fielding, who arrived in the 1970s as one of the first British Eurocrats, described Brussels procedures as a “euro-jungle” that was “beset with traps for the unwary and snake-pits for the unwelcome”.

But this prolific rule-making enterprise was always a subplot. Statecraft really comes alive in the European Council summit room, usually after dark, when the leaders of EU member states sit down to business. During the 53 gatherings I witnessed, the rule book often provided no answers. The aftershocks of the financial crisis rocked the euro area to its core; more than a million people walked over borders seeking asylum; people were shot in Ukraine at protests where the EU flag was waved. As the former EU official Luuk van Middelaar put it, these sorts of problems demanded the ultimate leadership test: “improvisation”.

As journalists we spent hours, days even, waiting for summits to end. Roughly 2,000 of us from around the world would cram into the Justus Lipsius building, appropriately named after a 16th-century philosopher whose book On Constancy revived the ancient creed of stoicism.

An FT correspondent seizes a quiet moment to nap at his desk at 4am, at a July 2015 summit; ‘roughly 2,000 of us [journalists] from around the world would spend hours, days even, waiting for summits to end’

Some slept where they could, head on desk, curled on the floor, or painfully stretched across make-shift beds of chairs pushed together.

Our trade depended on the advisers, the “sherpas” and ambassadors loitering in the corridors, who readily swapped gossip — although until the leaders were out, they often knew no more than us. When an issue was truly important, it was down to the prime ministers and presidents alone in that room.

Of all Europe’s crises, Brexit has arguably transformed the fabric of Brussels more than any other. It was not sudden, but a gradual affair where the EU’s third-biggest member state peeled away from the bloc’s power centre. On this journey, a handful of summits stick in my mind; some felt immediately historic, others only gained that significance with the passage of time.

Alex Barker (left) in 2012, a year into the job, in the Berlaymont building in Brussels, with (second from left) the FT’s Peter Spiegel and Michel Barnier (right), then the EU Commissioner overseeing financial services

It was almost 5am. Everyone felt dazed, sleepless yet exhilarated. Something big had happened at the summit. The press conferences were about to start. Out of curiosity I walked to the end of a corridor, where a door was slightly ajar. To this day I still don’t know why he was in that side room. But there was Nicolas Sarkozy, chest out, chin up, twitching with energy as his team looked on.

The French president strode to his press conference like a prize fighter, flush with victory. Meanwhile, over in the UK room, the journalists patiently awaited David Cameron. He took almost an hour to emerge.

The British prime minister had arrived at the summit thinking he had leverage. The euro area was in deep trouble. The UK was peripheral to the crisis, but Angela Merkel needed Cameron’s support for a treaty change that would tighten fiscal rules for all members of the single currency — a dose of discipline to assuage German voter concerns over a series of costly financial bailouts, and to reassure volatile financial markets.

UK Prime Minister David Cameron glancing at Germany’s Chancellor Merkel during a summit in December 2011. The two had clashed over proposed treaty changes. In the end, the 27 other member states decided to sidestep the UK

President Nicolas Sarkozy of France explaining to the press corps that leaders had agreed to do a deal without the UK – a serious break with convention: ‘It was a real political rupture’ © Bloomberg

The Conservative party’s Eurosceptic wing expected Britain to win something in return. Cameron bid high, insisting he would go along with the treaty only if he won concessions to preserve UK control over how the City of London was regulated. He failed spectacularly. Old hands in Brussels recall it as a supreme example of botched summit diplomacy — and that room has seen some breathtaking howlers.

The UK team had spent a fortnight talking only to Berlin about their wish list. They got nowhere. By the time Cameron presented his highly technical demands to the summit at 2.30am, the game was up.

Some leaders saw it as a ransom demand, seeking national gain from the eurozone’s woes — and all to reduce the burden of regulation on London’s financial services firms, a sector that many saw as helping to cause the global financial crisis in the first place. “David, we are not paying you to save the euro,” thundered Sarkozy.

EU leaders at the end of the December 2011 summit, where it became apparent that the UK and the EU were on divergent paths. However, Cameron’s isolated stance in Brussels played well in the UK © AFP

Cameron later said he had “exercised my veto” on treaty change, but he never actually used those words in the room. The rest of the EU agreed to do a side deal without him, breaking with the convention that the European Council moved as one. It was a real political rupture.

Cameron badly misread Merkel and the strength of Germany’s fixation on treaty change. The German chancellor and Sarkozy elbowed him aside over a fiscal treaty that, in hindsight, was mainly symbolic. In practice, it neither saved the euro (that would take much bigger summit decisions and central bank action), nor curbed member states’ public spending.

But the aftermath reinforced the sense of the UK and EU being on divergent paths. Cameron’s defeat in Brussels was greeted by cheers at home. Rather than suffer, his approval rating rose among British voters. Boris Johnson, then mayor of London, said the prime minister had “played a blinder”, while the Daily Mail said “defiant Cameron” had stood up to “Euro bullies”.

With the rise of Nigel Farage’s UK Independence party an ever-increasing threat to the Conservatives’ electoral chances, Cameron’s inner circle began to think seriously about pledging to hold an in-out referendum in their 2015 election manifesto.

In May 2014, Ukip triumphed in Britain’s European elections, winning 27.5 per cent of the vote; the first time a party other than the Conservatives or Labour had won a national election since 1906. It was an inauspicious moment for Cameron, and the second half of the year did not bring much relief.

In June, he was overruled on the nomination of Jean-Claude Juncker as European Commission president. After almost two decades as leader of Luxembourg, Juncker was seen by many as past his prime, both physically and politically. Cameron voiced the concerns of a number of leaders, including Merkel. “We will not let this happen,” Merkel privately assured him. But German politics shifted and Merkel tacked with it. Cameron ended up virtually alone.

Cameron with EC president Herman Van Rompuy at Downing Street on June 23 2014. The British PM reiterated his objections to Jean-Claude Juncker becoming head of the commission; the meeting lasted little more than half an hour © Getty

Before the June summit, Cameron invited Herman Van Rompuy, the European Council president, to Downing Street. It was hardly worth the Eurostar ticket. The meeting went so badly it lasted little more than half an hour. “Would the same happen to France or Germany?” Cameron angrily asked, according to one witness. Britain, to him, just wasn’t being treated like Europe’s other big powers; its views were expendable. By this stage Cameron knew he was comprehensively outnumbered but demanded a vote on Juncker at the European Council anyway. He preferred to go down in flames to make his point.

As he escorted Van Rompuy down the No 10 stairs, Cameron lashed out at the Germans. Asked whether he felt duped or abandoned, one person privy to the invective said: “It was more explicit than that.”

A summit in October, a few months later, was supposed to be routine but became more than that. As leaders gathered, the FT revealed that the UK had been presented with a surprise £1.7bn EU budget charge, to be paid in six weeks. It was a technical accounting revision to national contributions — Italy, Greece, Cyprus and the Netherlands were also asked to pay an additional charge. But the politics was explosive.

Since Margaret Thatcher went to a summit and demanded “our money back”, the EU budget has been viewed as a test of strength for Tory prime ministers. Our scoop appeared on five UK front pages that night. A “downright angry” Cameron hastily arranged meetings with other leaders. “If people think I am paying that bill . . . they have another thing coming,” he boomed at a press conference.

Some suspected EU skulduggery for the leak. My source actually gave me the document in reply to a different question, unaware of the trauma it contained. As a journalist I felt thrilled. The timing was exquisite, the story accurate. But a poll a week later showed support for leaving the EU take a sudden nine-point lead. Looking back, I would of course write it again. But it underlined how you can never predict how stories will play out.

In October 2014, the politics of a £1.7bn EU budget charge became explosive in the UK: ‘If people think I am paying that bill… they have another thing coming’ Cameron told the press © Reuters

On the sidelines, bigger things were afoot at that summit. Cameron raised with Merkel the idea of an “emergency brake” on the EU’s founding principle of free movement — he wanted a cap on EU migrants arriving in Britain. It was Cameron’s attempt to protect his rightward flank from Ukip.

For once, the German chancellor was unmistakably clear: “Nein, nein, nein.” According to one witness, Merkel asked why immigration was an issue for Cameron, saying she would be happy with more workers. Cameron eventually ended up exploring other, softer solutions to his “problem”, principally involving tweaks to the UK benefits system to reduce the appeal of moving to Britain to work. There was trouble ahead for both leaders.

During 2015, the brutal but distant-seeming war in Syria, which had begun four years before, turned the politics of Europe upside down: within a few months, more than a million asylum-seekers entered the EU by land and by sea. Hundreds of thousands were fleeing the violence in Syria, while many others came from Afghanistan and Iraq.

The refugee crisis illuminated stark divisions between EU member states over how to respond. Hungary built a razor-wire fence on its border with Serbia and used tear gas and water cannons on migrants. In Germany, Merkel announced that all Syrian asylum-seekers were welcome, regardless of which EU country they had first entered.

Migrants and refugees from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq trying to reach the Greek island of Lesbos in October 2015. The refugee crisis shook Europe’s foundations – and may well have swung votes in the UK’s EU referendum

Angela Merkel lunching with Turkish PM Ahmet Davutoglu (on her right, blue tie) in March 2016, during a summit called to tackle the EU’s migration crisis; her proposed solution was to make Turkey a ‘safe country’ © AFP

By early 2016, some order was slowly returning. Restrictions were back on borders that had been open along the migrant trail. But the European project seemed acutely vulnerable. Doom-laden predictions were rife. Britain was far removed from the worst, receiving fewer asylum applications than Germany, Italy, Hungary or Sweden. But its EU referendum was looming. “Stay or leave, Europe is sinking anyway,” proclaimed The Spectator.

For me, this particular episode was more personal. My mother is Turkish. Ankara was my family home from the age of 10. As events unfolded, I reported from the Syrian border, the Greek islands and along the migrant trail. Alan Kurdi, the Syrian toddler whose small drowned body became the image of the crisis, was found on a beach within walking distance of our summer house. Even when writing in far-off Brussels, at times I was overcome with emotion.

Conditions on the Greek islands were (and remain) a disgrace. Early on, I saw children crammed into the Captain Elias, an abandoned, fetid hotel in Kos with no water or electricity. In the entrance, Asma Drebas, a mother from Damascus, seized my arm to ask why money wired to her was blocked: “Even in Syria it works!” It was June 2015 and Drebas had inadvertently sought refuge in the EU’s financial black spot. Greece was under capital controls. Europe’s twin dramas had collided.

For the EU, the challenge was profound. This was Europe fulfilling its postwar mission as a safe haven, an enterprise of peace, its arms open to those fleeing persecution. Yet at the same time it exposed the project as incomplete, dysfunctional and divided.

The March 2016 summit was a turning point. The result was only agreed — naturally — after an all-night summit that looked like an epic diplomatic muddle.

Merkel’s aim was to reach a deal of breathtaking simplicity: to turn back all migrants reaching Greek islands to the “safe country” of Turkey. To stop the incentive to make the journey — and undermine smuggling — the islands would be turned into a kind of buffer zone, from which it was much harder to reach mainland Europe. On the summit eve, she and Mark Rutte, the Dutch prime minister, met Turkey’s prime minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, to thrash out terms. The freelance negotiating stunned the other EU leaders. With a reference to George Orwell, a furious Donald Tusk, the European Council president, told leaders: “All animals are equal on my farm.”

Merkel at friterie Maison Antoine in February 2016. Some say she headed there after leaving the summit early, bored by David Cameron ‘squabbling over trifles’ while she steered the EU through an existential crisis © Reuters

Eventually the deal was done; one senior official hailed it as one of the first examples of the EU “playing realpolitik”. By the time of Britain’s referendum in June, the migration crisis had abated. But its political shadow was long. Farage unveiled a widely criticised poster shortly before the vote showing a long line of migrants and refugees crossing the Croatia-Slovenia border in 2015, with the words “Breaking point. The EU has failed us all.” It is impossible to tell if it swung votes, but the issue certainly reinforced the view of Europe as a source of problems, not hope.

Seen from Brussels, what stood out in early 2016 was the UK’s tin ear. As Europe’s foundations shook over migration, Britain was dragging EU leaders into its self-made referendum crisis.

In February, Cameron’s attempt to secure a “new deal” for Britain within the EU — with which he hoped to win the referendum — had come to its denouement. His six-month diplomatic drive ended in a squabble over relative trifles, such as the benefits paid to workers’ children living overseas. In total it amounted to about £30m of UK spending a year — on government accounts, barely a rounding error. One official told me Merkel was so bored she left the summit to try delicacies at a nearby friterie.

There was a terrible storm in Brussels on Britain’s referendum night. The skies had cleared when I cycled to the office at 4am, high on adrenalin. By then it was obvious the Leave campaign had prevailed.

After I wrote up the first news stories about the historic vote, I felt a surge of emotion. It wasn’t European idealism, or a hatred of Brexit. It was more boring and practical than that, a sense of how damn complicated it would be to unravel four decades of power-sharing, common laws and common markets, the years of wasted energy that all entailed.

Two conversations stand out from the months before the vote. “We’re not revolutionaries,” the Brexiter John Redwood told me, arguing Britain’s exit required no Article 50 negotiation. Independence could be achieved in a single day, he said, with no disruption. About the same time, Sir Ivan Rogers, the British ambassador to the EU, said it would be both a decade-long revolution and “balls-achingly tedious and technical”. It’s not hard to see who was proved more right.

The British flag being taken down outside the EU headquarters in Brussels on June 28 2016, two days after the UK voted to leave the EU… © AFP

… alongside a group of British expats protesting about the result. As one EU official said to Barker: ‘We are [now] faced with a million mad questions and we won’t have answers anytime soon’

Once Brexit hit, everyone was groping around in the dark. Britain hadn’t prepared and had no plan. The term “customs union” — which today the government can’t seem to stop arguing about — was mentioned in just 150 UK press pieces in the six months before the vote. (That includes a letter to the Sevenoaks Chronicle from a Mr Firth of Halstead.)

But it wasn’t just the UK side. The plumbing of the EU was so taken for granted, establishing what it meant to disconnect a member state was a journey of discovery for Brussels too. On the morning of Brexit, a senior EU official told me: “We are faced with a million mad questions and we won’t have answers any time soon.”

What the EU can master quickly, however, is process. Much of that — the terms of engagement with Brexit Britain, the conditions for a negotiation — was decided even before the vote. By the time EU leaders met on June 29, just days after the referendum, the tramlines were set, and not in London’s favour.

To the EU, self-preservation mattered above all. The EU had not chosen Brexit, but they would decide what was possible in the terms of exit. Britain still had a chance to shape the course of events. But Westminster needed to be fleet of foot, know what it wanted, and make choices. (So much for that.)

EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and Council President Donald Tusk (right) preparing to brief the press on June 29 2016; ‘just days after the referendum, the tramlines were set, and not in London’s favour’ © AFP

Cameron’s last summit supper was polite enough (one leader left the meeting remarking, “Only nice things can be said about the dead”). A more historic moment came the next morning.

The EU met as 27, without the Brits. A psychological threshold was crossed. For many in that room, the club had already lost a member. “Brexit had happened,” said another leader.

A couple of years ago, European Council meetings moved to a new venue: the Europa building, sometimes known as “the space egg”. In pictures of the summit room it is hard to see beyond Georges Meurant’s over-bright polychrome design. But when entering the room, it’s actually the physical space that strikes you.

The circular table is relatively small. Leaders are virtually touching elbows. Adding to the intimate feel are unnervingly good acoustics. Silence weighs heavy. I always thought of that intensity when imagining Theresa May in there, pitching Brexit to Europe’s toughest political audience. She rarely veered from her public script, a doomed tactic in such company.

The summit room in the Europa building, where the European Council now holds its meetings. ‘Leaders are virtually touching elbows. Adding to the intimate feel are unnervingly good acoustics. Silence weighs heavy’ © EPA

British Prime Minister Theresa May in the summit room in October 2017, preparing to meet Donald Tusk. When she pitched to ‘Europe’s toughest political audience… she rarely veered from her script – a doomed tactic’ © AFP

One of those moments came in April this year, when the EU debated a Brexit extension. May had spectacularly failed to win House of Commons support for the draft withdrawal agreement. Britain had already been granted one short extension, and was now seeking a second, nominally to give May more time to build a majority.

Emmanuel Macron, the French president, was staunchly against. He believed time pressure would force Britain to decide: leave in an orderly fashion, revoke Article 50 or face the disruption of no deal. The summit splintered into small group discussions. Macron was in a minority but took on all-comers.

At the other extreme was Tusk, advocating an extension of up to a year to spare leaders coming back to Brexit every few weeks.

It was a tense, scratchy evening. There was an unusual degree of bad feeling. Immediately afterwards, one fellow leader, angry with Macron’s willingness to gamble, described him as “drunk on power”. Facing the thick fog of Brexit, Merkel was resorting to her favoured crisis-handling technique: “auf Sicht fahren”, or to drive by sight, creeping forward only as far as you can see. She thought more time was the safest option; the differences with Macron were surprisingly public.

The moment a scrum of diplomats, ‘sherpas’ and officials started work on a compromise text regarding a Brexit extension, captured in March by Dimiter Tzantchev, Bulgaria’s EU ambassador

The extension was granted to October 31. Tusk told Britain: “Don’t waste it.” Some leaders already regret it. Opinion is moving in Macron’s favour — as is his clout within the club. Whatever Britain decides to do in the coming weeks, next time the EU is likely to be less forgiving.

Some three years after Britain voted to leave the EU it has yet to do so, but the EU’s balance of power has been profoundly altered. My own stint will be over by the time Boris Johnson, a veteran of Brussels’ press corps, attends his first summit in October.

Barker and Michel Barnier (right) in Strasbourg after Theresa May’s deal was rejected by the UK parliament. Britain has not yet left – but its vote to do so has ‘profoundly altered the EU’s balance of power’, Barker concludes

We both claim Turkish heritage and, curiously, our relatives were both journalists and scribblers in late-Ottoman Istanbul. From what I can tell, Ahmet Rasim and Ali Kemal even praised each other in columns, although they ended up on different sides of a revolution.

While I am all for Anglo-Turkish former Brussels correspondents being blessed with fame and high office, I don’t envy Johnson for the summit(s) he will attend, or those after Brexit that he may watch from afar. They can be hard enough when you are a member of the club. Inside or out, many of the predicaments will remain the same, as will Britain’s unique perspective on postwar Europe.

Jean Monnet, a founding father of the European project, whose invitations London spurned, described it as “the price of victory — the illusion that you could maintain what you had, without change”.

Alex Barker is the FT’s outgoing Brussels bureau chief. He becomes global media editor in September

B&W photographs courtesy of Alex Barker

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