



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Starmer and Macron sweep Brexit under the carpet



The crisis of confidence in politics is accepted as a given on many sides of the political divide. Particularly those who want to stop the far-right from exploiting this lack of trust in politicians and institutions, in fact, the whole democratic system, have made this the focus of their own brand of politics.

Few exemplify this particular direction more than Emmanuel Macron and Keir Starmer, who met this week for the French president's first state **visit** to the UK since Brexit.

The occasion almost coincided with Starmer and Labour marking their first year in power.

Yet, listening to their speeches, reading through their statements, and looking at what is actually being achieved, both Macron and Starmer very much appear to be part of the problem, rather than the solution to the public's fading belief in politics.

While symbolism and tone do matter, the combination of grand pronouncements with a decided lack of substance is exactly part of what is turning many people off politics.

The core ideas being sold to the public, a EU-UK **'reset'**, a **'coalition** of the willing' on Ukraine, even the promises to 'stop the boats', all seem devoid of effective content, political will, actual meaning, or all of the above.

It's not really a surprise, since nobody wants to address the Union Jack-bedecked elephant in the room.

"To look forward, not back"

Brexit's noxious legacy not only looms over EU-UK relations and Labour's first year in **power**, it also still stands as one of the most decisive blows to the trust in politics and to the rules-based international system.

Almost ten years after the fact, the Leave campaign and subsequently Brexit keep poisoning the well of both British and international politics. They stand as original sins that British politicians in particular keep

trying to cover up with badly placed and laughably inadequate fig leaves.

Labour's first year in power has overwhelmingly been judged a disappointment, with Starmer's personal approval **ratings** nosediving worse than any other British PM's after one year in No. 10.

One measure of Starmer's failure to staunch the haemorrhaging of support for mainstream politics is Reform UK, led by arch-Brexiteer Nigel Farage, leading Labour in opinion polls by a significant margin.

Starmer and Labour have been engulfed both in petty controversies and major political snafus and U-turns. Who could have seen this coming from a leader who so heedlessly turned from being a committed Remainer to a bland Brexit surrender monkey along the way to power?

What might have looked like a clever way to win elections, admittedly quite a feat given Labour's dire position at the time, has turned into a 'Ming vase' millstone around the necks of Labour ministers too afraid to rock the boat, even with the huge majority they have in parliament.

Starmer reiterated before a recent UK-EU summit that he wanted "to look forward, not back"

The Ming vase **strategy** was supposed to have been the core Labour campaign idea of carefully tiptoeing around all sensitive subjects so as not to upset voters. First and foremost among these was Brexit.

Starmer adopted an almost Johnsonian attitude of moving on from Brexit, reiterating before a recent UK-EU summit that he **wanted** "to look forward, not back." The result has been an almost comedic, Fawlty Towers-esque 'don't mention the war!' shadow play.

Everybody knows they're being lied to, but the subject is too fraught and exhausting to

confront head-on.

This does not only apply to Starmer and Labour, a large part of the British commentariat keeps tying itself in knots when trying to deal with both the fallout from Brexit and its origins.

The line among a large part of centrists, from Labour supporters to the remnant of One Nation Conservatives, appears to be that, of course, it would be overwhelmingly in the British national, especially economic, interest to at least rejoin the European Single Market.

This has been explicitly ruled out by Starmer and is unlikely to change, mostly because of the looming **threat** of Reform UK and Nigel Farage. His continuing appeal to a large swath of voters is seen as a mystery to many centrists. They land on the same type of explanation as I started this piece with: a lack of trust in mainstream politics.

But this fails to address an uncomfortable truth for most commentators and politicians alike: part of that lack of trust is fed by atavistic undercurrents that have become increasingly weaponised by developments in society and technology over the past few decades.

A government that doesn't stand for anything

It's now almost wholly unfashionable to point it out, because we want the electorate to feel good about itself and not give it an additional reason to turn against the 'elites', but Brexit was to a very large degree driven by xenophobia, as studies have confirmed and I have anecdotally encountered when reporting on it.

Any political party that wants to build a winning coalition, including in Labour's so-called red wall seats, will ignore and bury that fact in order not to turn off the people whose votes it seeks.



Xenophobia is being legitimised, and any honest discussion on immigration, demographics, the economy, and a host of other connected issues is becoming impossible

Yet, while this might be a sound electoral strategy, and it can be argued that once in power, a party can then address the real root causes of such polarisation, the actual result is the opposite: Xenophobia is being legitimised, and any honest discussion on immigration, demographics, the economy, and a host of other connected issues is becoming impossible.

Harping on Brexit is now seen as a bore, an embarrassment, a hindrance, an irrelevance, as being stuck in the past. Even a place to look at its impact, The Centre for Brexit Studies at Birmingham City University, where I was a visiting fellow, was closed down earlier this year.

Again, not surprising, given the financial pressures on Britain's academic system, but even these have at the very least been exacerbated by Brexit.

Labour and Starmer seem to be banking mainly on economic growth and an increased feeling of material wellbeing later in the current parliament to get to a second term. While it's early days, the signs of such an economic miracle are few and far between.

Even if things turn around on the economy, a government that doesn't stand for anything could turn off many voters.

Both Starmer and Macron have been trying this week to project an image of business as usual, of purpose and determination in the

face of many challenges, be they Trump, Russia, China, or indeed, economic headwinds.

While saying he 'regretted' Brexit, Macron also took the sting out of the debate with a joke. He **spoke** on France's loan to Britain of the Bayeux tapestry on the occasion of 1000 years since the birth of William the Conqueror. The process had taken longer than all the Brexit talks, the French president quipped. Way to sweep the issue under the carpet.