

A French minister's thoughts on Brexit: William Horsley writes up the AEJ's meeting with French minister for digital affairs, Axelle Lemaire...

The French Minister for Digital Affairs in the Ministry of Economics and Industry, spoke at a meeting of AEJ and other journalists in London on 14 July – France’s national day. She was sharply critical of what she called “lying” by some politicians in the campaign leading up to the British referendum vote to leave the EU. And she gave a stark assessment of what she called the UK’s lack of any coherent strategy on what to do next, and the potential damage to the stability of the whole of Europe.

The new British prime minister, Theresa May, had said that “Brexit means Brexit”. But Mrs. Lemaire – like a number of other elected European politicians – revealed her frustration and even alarm that the post-referendum debate in the UK seems to ignore what she sees as a self-evident reality: that the UK will not be able to pick and choose what bits of the current relationship with Europe it wants or does not want.

“...But you won’t be there to decide!”, she remarked at one point in a lively discussion that followed the French minister’s opening remarks. “The implication is clear: that the UK will be no match for the 27 remaining members of the EU in the coming negotiations on Britain’s separation from the union. “

The point underlines what looks like a fundamental and possibly fatal lack of common understanding as the UK approaches the fateful task of uncoupling itself from the EU after 40 years.

Mrs. Lemaire regretted that, as she put it, a whole generation of British people had been conditioned to think that being “against Europe” was in the UK’s national interest; so the popular vote to quit the EU had been no great surprise to her. The blame for that, she said, lay with the politicians and others who had long made euro-scepticism the “dominant discourse” of British public life.

Axelle Lemaire spent more than ten years in the UK as a postgraduate student, lawyer and parliamentary assistant to a British MP. She painted a dark picture of the consequences of Brexit for both the UK and the rest of the EU, and expressed something close to incredulity that the UK had brought such misfortune on itself and its nearest neighbours. She was scathing about the fact that millions of EU citizens in Britain, as well as UK citizens living in EU countries, do not know if they will be obliged to go home or if they can stay where they are.

She thinks Britain will be a significant loser after allowing “domestic political games” to drive the public debate which has led to the Brexit decision.

She described how the UK might get an unpleasant surprise as a result of the decision to become an outsider: “In a way,” she said, “having Britain out of the EU may be an opportunity [for other EU states], because Britain has been blocking any real discussions about political union.” The concept of “political union”, involving more radical and rapid steps towards political, military or monetary integration among certain EU states, has long been an aspiration for some leaders in Germany and some other countries, and an absolute red flag to the main established political parties in the UK.

Axelle Lemaire also pointed to significant short- and long-term risks for Europe as a whole. She echoed President Hollande’s demand that the UK should present its intentions to its EU partners without delay, to start the process of negotiating its departure swiftly so as to minimise the political uncertainty and the risks of turmoil on financial markets.

Brexit, she feared, could end in a much wider fragmentation of Europe. The situation

was volatile because of what she called Europe's "shameful failure" to address the refugee crisis. She was also concerned about "contagion" from Britain in the form of demands for referendums on EU membership in countries like Hungary, Poland, Spain, Denmark and Ireland. And, as she remarked, the unsettling waves from the UK referendum could be felt, too, in next year's presidential election in France, where Marine LePen of the Front National would be mounting a renewed challenge on an anti-EU ticket.

The French minister described the UK as the most powerful voice in the EU in upholding the Union's "critical stance" towards Russia. She voiced her personal anxiety that without the UK as a member, a strong European response to potential threats from Russia would be weakened -- especially in view of political divisions that have recently re-emerged among the two governing parties in Germany over dealings with Moscow.

So could Franco-British cooperation provide some assurances in the field of European defence?, she was asked. Axelle Lemaire stressed that President Hollande has pledged to strengthen the wide-ranging defence cooperation between France and the UK based on the 2010 Lancaster House agreement for a long-term bilateral partnership in the fields of defence, military procurement, security and nuclear cooperation.

For Mrs. Lemaire - as for many organisations and employers in the UK - a massive and still unanswered question is whether the Brexiteers who have been appointed to senior posts in the incoming British government will gamble away the huge economic benefits of the UK's membership of the EU single market in the hope of winning the freedom unilaterally to cut the number of EU migrant workers coming to the UK. She was adamant that the rest of the EU would not give the UK an exemption from the EU's rules on freedom of movement of labour - one of the so-called "four freedoms" of the single market, together with freedom of movement of goods, services and capital.

If Britain were to reject the fixed rules of the single market, she implied, London would lose access to the single market and so put at risk its envied position as the preferred location for as much as 40 percent of all the multinational corporations active in Europe to site their European headquarters.

France is itself eager to attract a larger share such inward investment. Mrs. Lemaire pointed out that some international banks and other institutions might decide to quit London if the city loses its so-called "passporting rights" that allow financial institutions to do business across the whole of the EU under the single market rules. Leading French politicians have already declared they are ready to "roll out the red carpet" to welcome banks and businesses that may decide to move away from London in the new post-Brexit environment.

And Mrs. Lemaire painted an upbeat picture of the prospects for the French economy after several years of stagnation. Ongoing economic and labour market reforms in France were aimed at making France into the leading "innovation economy in Europe".

"In that way", she said, "France has become more like Britain". But the larger message from this Anglophilic French minister, speaking in London, is that a divorce is always painful. And afterwards, nothing can ever be quite the same as it was before.