
BREXIT DRAFT DEAL BRIGHTENS BARNIER'S POLITICAL PROSPECTS

-

15.11.2018

EurActiv (15 November 2018)

The tentative Brexit deal grudgingly approved by the British cabinet on Wednesday (14 November) could yet fall apart, but for one man it is already a personal victory.

No-one in Brussels welcomed Britains decision to quit the European Union, but Michel Barnier has been hailed for at least keeping the other 27 members together during the divorce talks.

The unions chief negotiator, a veteran French politician and Brussels insider whose best days were seen as behind him, has seemed to relish the challenge.

And he beamed, albeit with a fatigued air, when he stepped up to announce the draft accord, the fruit of what he described as 17 months of very intense negotiations.

Theres no more green. White is the new green, he said as he leafed triumphantly through the 585-page withdrawal agreement, joking about the coloured ink used on passages still under debate.

Yes, were tired, thats for sure, he said, praising his team, which has been locked in what some officials here called a diplomatic tunnel for weeks to hammer out the fine print.

But I hope we hide it well, he continued. We also have the energy and determination that gave us this unity and the confidence of European leaders.

When Britain voted in June 2016 to leave the EU, there were fears in Brussels that it could trigger a domino effect that would see the bloc splinter.

The deal agreed this week wont keep Britain in, but Barnier has been hailed by his peers for keeping the other 27 members united behind his negotiating strategy till the end.

Juncker warns May not to go over Michel Barnier's head

Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker made a stern warning to UK Prime Minister Theresa May that she should not attempt to go over the head of the EUs chief negotiator by opening direct discussions with member state leaders like Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron.

He has stood by Irelands concerns over its border with the land border in the UK, and reassured business about the dangers of disruption to ties with Britains large economy.

And in doing so, he has revived his own career, perhaps even placing himself in line once again for

the post he was passed over for in 2014 — president of the European Commission.

It's not too early for Barnier to throw his hat in the ring

Not to beat about the bushes, Michel Barnier should succeed Jean-Claude Juncker. Not just because his handling of the Brexit process has enlarged his stature, but for a number of other cogent reasons, writes Gilles Merritt.

Barnier demonstrated flexibility and great political savvy in the negotiations. His job was to keep the 27 together and to have a frank dialogue with the British, said Jean-Dominique Giuliani of the Robert Schuman Foundation.

The 27 have always backed him up and trusted him, he added.

Barnier for President, says Brussels-bubble

Michel Barnier is the top candidate to win the European Commission presidency after next Mays European elections, as a reward for delivering Brexit. At least, that is what the Brussels-bubble thinks, according to a survey published on Thursday (12 April).

A convinced European, the 67-year-old former minister had hoped to take a role in building rather than dismantling the union when he sought the backing of the centre-right EPP to take Brussels top job.

But his own French conservative party failed to swing behind him, and former Luxembourg premier Jean-Claude Juncker got the job instead.

Isolated in Brussels, Barnier later hoped to return to his homeland of Savoie in the French Alps as president of the regional assembly, but again local barons of his UMP opposed him.

He embodies Europe □ everything our voters dont want, one party powerbroker told colleagues ahead of the 2015 poll, in a conversation overheard by an AFP reporter in Strasbourg.

Friends say these failures left him bitter, but it was Europe that came to the rescue, albeit with a role mitigating what he sees as the lose-lose decision of British voters to quit the union.

Pragmatic and experienced

Former rival Juncker named him as a special adviser, then handed him the tricky but high-profile task of agreeing divorce terms with the prickly Brits.

Two years later, Barnier felt he had to announce he was not seeking EPP support to replace Juncker next year – and the party picked little-known Bavarian MEP Manfred Weber.

But Brexit has allowed Barnier to stay above the fray ahead of next Mays European elections, and he could yet have a role in the horse-trading to come.

When late French leader Charles de Gaulle opposed Britains entry into the then European Common Market, Barnier voted in a 1972 French referendum to allow it in.

I have never regretted that vote because there is strength in unity, he has repeatedly declared.

Barnier served variously as Frances environment, European affairs, agriculture and foreign minister – learning the dossiers that now bedevil the complicated break-up talks.

And in Brussels, where he has been Commissioner for finance and for the single market, he mastered the arcane mysteries of EU law.

He knows about the problems well have to negotiate with the British, Juncker explained.

Power players

Britains task was a hard one; the dissolution of legal, political and trade ties built over four decades after a narrow majority of voters backed an exit rejected by the bulk of the political elite.

But Barniers political challenge was almost as complex. He is the Brexit point man not only for his nominal employer the European Commission, but also for the 27 remaining member states.

But, while Britain repeatedly changed its own main negotiator, and Prime Minister Theresa May has tried and failed to go above his head directly to fellow national leaders, Barnier has held on.

Theresa May takes control of Brexit talks

Prime Minister Theresa May announced yesterday (24 July) she will take personal control of Brexit negotiations with the EU, as time runs out to get a deal before Britain leaves the bloc in March.

And on Thursday he will be standing alongside European Council president Donald Tusk to announce plans for a leaders summit to approve his deal.

Kaynak/Source: