

A PEEK BEHIND THE CURTAINS

Living in **Brexit's past** (back to Erasmus made in 1987)

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Ditch your history notes and geography maps. Forget everything you've been taught about politics or economics. The fundamental issue with Brexit is people. And in particular, it's about how millions of young people in Great Britain are about to have their European dreams and future taken away through lies and cheating. Watch out - you could be next!



Madeleine Kay (EU Supergirl) – Young European of the Year, 2018.

I would like to start by (not) apologising for borrowing my title from Jeff Bridge's recent "Living in the future's past". In his documentary film about the environment, he asks "What kind of future do we want to live in?", reminding us that individuals as part of one big super-organism can have an impact on their future, now. Not only does his narrative resonate with what is currently happening in Great Britain and Europe, but the advert for the film popped up whilst I was watching 700,000 people on TV marching through the streets of London to demand a people's final vote on the Brexit deal before social, economic and political (too late for that one) Armageddon hits the British Isles.

Indeed, as **Taoiseach** Leo Varadkar says, Brexit is not "a passing squall", but a "political equivalent of climate change" that will have a permanent effect on future relations between the UK and the EU.

Back in the summer of 1987, nearly 30 years before the UK referendum, I had just turned 20 – more or less exactly your age now. Studying Bilingual Administration (course titles were not very sexy in those days), I was on an Erasmus exchange programme in Strasbourg. I can still remember vividly the day a few months earlier our course leader, Angela Murphy (or 'big Ange') had come into the classroom to proudly announce that we would all be going off to France the following summer for a few months, thanks to some new funding from the European Union, or the **EEC** as we used to

call it in those days. Later in her life, Big Ange was awarded an **OBE** for her services to higher education, but what she did that day was to profoundly change the rest of each one of our lives. There were about 30 of us in that class. Mainly from the industrial north and the midlands, the closest most of us had ever got to Europe was the annual 2-week family holiday in Benidorm (if you were lucky). Some of us had never even met or spoken to a 'real' French person before, apart from the gorgeous Florence - our French commercial correspondence teacher - let alone imagined we could possibly spend a whole summer with 'the Frogs' thanks to this huge pot of money from the EEC!

Go somewhere !

So, going to France was a big deal back in the eighties for a working-class lad from Preston (to give you an idea, people say they have "been through" Preston either on a train or a bus – no one ever tells you they have actually "been to" Preston). And talking about correspondence, in those days there were no computers, no emails, no mobile phones, no SMS, if you wanted, for example, to date a French girl (or boy, or Florence) you had to ask outright, dial home or... write a letter! And no Netflix either. In preparation for our trip to Strasbourg I sent my parents **nuts** watching video tapes of Jean de Florette and Manon des Sources back-to-back for hours on end. But I had a great accent – even better than Chris Waddle (although we shared the same haircut).

And so, we ended up somehow in Strasbourg, living in the **halls of residence** and studying at l'IECS (institut européen d'études commerciales supérieures), now EM Strasbourg, with youngsters from all over Europe. Thanks to my impersonation of Ugolin, I ended up in a group that was way too good for me. One of the girls in the group from Denmark already spoke 7 languages, but I thought of Florence and **kept going regardless**. We had a crazy Japanese Marketing teacher (and Karate blackbelt), who did a great case study on the Kronenbourg brewery. Apart from being able to open bottles with his bare hands (no screw tops in those days), he organised a field trip to the brewery that culminated in a beer tasting session that went on for just a bit too long. At the end of the visit, the whole of Europe unfortunately decided to follow Ugolin onto the wrong local bus and we ended up getting thrown off somewhere over the

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German border near Koehl. I still don't remember to this day how on earth we managed to get back to our Halls. But this is exactly what the European Union and Erasmus is all about - giving people the freedom to go somewhere, do things, meet people and ultimately follow their dreams. I think that each and every one of my classmates on that summer trip to Strasbourg ended up going back to Europe in the later years on another Erasmus exchange programme. For me it was studying in La Rochelle, then living and working in Bastia, followed later by Pau. Back in its first year in 1987, just 3,244 students from 11 countries spent a study period abroad on Erasmus, but by the end of the 2013-2014 academic year, more than 3.3 million young Europeans had already learned, lived and probably loved in the EU since its launch. What better way to work together towards peace than to actually go out and **rub shoulders**, or get on the wrong bus, with your fellow European citizens?

The EU is an exchange of dreams...

And let's not forget that the origins of the EU are the European Coal and Steel Community of 1952, 7 years after the end of WW2 as a major first step towards lasting peace... One of my favourite video clips going around Twitter at the moment is of Robert Benigni, the Italian actor and film director (Life is Beautiful) warning about the anti-European movement in Italy,

"It's not an exchange of rules, of money, of paragraphs and articles, the EU is an exchange of dreams. If we don't let them destroy it, we can build for our grandchildren the biggest dream in the world"

Kudos Robert. Check out the video on Guy Verhofstadt's twitter handle at @guyverhofstadt - he's the Brexit coordinator for the European Parliament. I'm afraid that I can't help thinking that the level of **empowerment** offered by the EU for ordinary people is deeply disturbing for a certain section of the corporate and political elite. On the impact of Brexit, Scotland's first Minister, Nicola Sturgeon has gone on record as saying that, "Never has so much been lost by so many, to satisfy so few". Tartan **kudos** to her too. The provocative American filmmaker Michael Moore gives similar warnings about the



Femi Oluwole – Member of the "Our Future, Our Choice" movement.

situation with President Trump, saying his election did not just happen overnight and that it is the direct consequence of the will of political and corporate America.

So, if we go back to the title of this (rather biased pro-European) article and Jeff Bridge's documentary, I firmly believe that your generation has a major role to play now in defending your future. In spite of the EU not being 100 % perfect, I would hate it in the years to come if European students were denied the amazing opportunities I had back in the eighties. You are the lucky ones (for the moment), it's something that you can take for granted in France today, but there are kids of your age in the UK who are deeply worried about the sort of country they are going to be living in post-Brexit.

In December's edition of Espace Prépas, I'll be writing about two so-called **'snowflakes'**, who for the last 2 ½ years have given up their normal lives to fight for a European United Kingdom. Madelaine Kay (alias EU Supergirl) and Femi Oluwole talk to me about their fight and their motivations within the "Our Future Our Choice" movement. For an ex-1987 Erasmus Baby, Madelaine who was voted 'Young European of the Year' in 2018 and law **graduate** Femi, are a perfect representation of the energy of a new European youth that wants to take back control of their future from a political and corporate elite that does not want to listen to your generation!

You are living in the past of your European future, let's hope that the snowflakes become an avalanche! ●



Vocabulary

To ditch

If you ditch something that you have or are responsible for, you abandon it or get rid of it, because you no longer want it.

Taoiseach

The prime minister of the Republic of Ireland is called the Taoiseach.

Squall

A squall is a sudden strong wind which often causes a brief, violent rain storm or snow storm.

EEC

European Economic Community (now subsumed within the European Union).

OBE

Officer of (the Order of) the British Empire.

Send someone nuts

If you send someone nuts, you make them crazy or insane due to your behaviour.

Halls of residence

Halls of residence are buildings with rooms or flats, usually built by universities or colleges, in which students live during the term.

Keep going regardless

If you say that someone did something regardless, you mean that they did it even though there were problems or factors that could have stopped them, or perhaps should have stopped them.

Rub shoulders

If you rub shoulders with people, you meet them and talk to them.

Empowerment

The empowerment of a person or group of people is the process of giving them power and status in a particular situation.

Kudos

Kudos is admiration or recognition that someone or something gets as a result of a particular action or achievement.

A snowflake

The generation of people who became adults in the 2010s, viewed as being less resilient and more prone to taking offence than previous generations.

A graduate

In Britain, a graduate is a person who has successfully completed a degree at a university or college and has received a certificate that shows this.

All definitions available at: www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english