

What happens to the United Kingdom now?

Project Syndicate - Oct 30, 2019 | **CHRIS PATTEN**

The United Kingdom's Brexit psychodrama continues. Although the UK government and the European Union reached a revised withdrawal agreement in mid-October, Prime Minister Boris Johnson was unable to push the deal through Parliament so that the UK could leave the bloc by his hoped-for date of October 31. EU leaders have therefore granted a further three-month extension of the Brexit deadline until January 31, and the UK will now hold a parliamentary election on December 12.

Johnson secured the withdrawal agreement partly by reversing his previous position and accepting a customs border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and partly by settling for worse terms than his predecessor, Theresa May.

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It was Harold Macmillan, the UK's prime minister in the early 1960s, who concluded that the country should join what was then the European Common Market to reverse systemic, long-term economic decline. 1) _____ 1951 and 1973, Britain ranked last 2) _____ OECD economies, with average growth of just 3) _____ per year. Japan grew the fastest, 4) _____ at an average annual pace of 9.5%, 5) _____ Germany, France, and Italy clocked in at 5% or above.

Another Conservative prime 6) _____, Edward Heath, eventually got us through the 7) _____ door following the death of Charles de Gaulle, 8) _____ as France's president had been 9) _____ inveterate opponent of UK membership. From 1973, 10) _____ the UK joined, to 2016 (the 11) _____ of the Brexit referendum), our economy grew 12) _____ than those of Germany, France, and 13) _____. And after the real launch of the 14) _____ market in 1992 – one of Margaret Thatcher's 15) _____ achievements – the UK performed considerably better 16) _____ its traditional competitors, at least until 17) _____.

Of course, other factors – such as Thatcher's 18) _____ reforms – contributed to Britain's success. But 19) _____ overriding story was one of economic decline 20) _____ EU entry, and a jump forward 21) _____ we joined.

How 22) _____ the UK possibly be better off 23) _____ its closest and largest market than inside 24) _____? Why should we be able to 25) _____ bigger and better trade deals with other 26) _____ on our own rather than as 27) _____ of a market almost ten times our 28) _____? Some optimists believe that the UK 29) _____ take the world by storm as a deregulated, 30) _____ trader (“Singapore-on-Thames”). But they ignore the fact that stripping away environmental regulations, health and safety checks, and workers' rights would be politically calamitous for the Conservative Party, and for the Union.

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