

TAO-AFI, The Association of Independent Officials

## BREXIT TESTIMONIALS



Deal-no deal, hard Brexit? Extension of the deadline? 2<sup>nd</sup> referendum?  
Legal consequences, financial impact...

How are our British colleagues living all this uncertainty? Are we aware of what the colleague in the office next door is going through these days?

Herewith we present a few highly representative testimonials.

\*Diane :

« Like many of us Brits on the Continent I was denied the vote by the U.K. in its referendum on whether to remain or leave the E.U. even though the outcome affected me directly as a British citizen living on the Continent. We share this experience with fellow E.U. citizens living in the U.K. who were also denied the vote unlike in the referendum on Scottish independence.

That was quite frustrating in and of itself, so when I watched as the campaign unfolded in an atmosphere of xenophobia, which claimed the life of an M.P., my frustration, turned into disbelief. I could not believe that the events unfolding before my very eyes and ears were taking place in my own homeland. That the politics of “them and us” had taken hold of my country.

I knew I would not sleep a wink so I stayed up the night of the E.U. referendum with a pot of coffee for company until the result was confirmed. I was beyond devastated even though, unlike many, I had long suspected that leave might win for a variety of reasons.

It was around 07:00hrs on the morning after the vote when my phone started ringing with many of my friends, colleagues and family calling to express disbelief and commiseration. The question on everyone’s mind was “what now?”. “What happens next?”. There was no precedent for this so both the U.K. and E.U. would have to make it up as they went along.

A party on the weekend after the E.U. referendum turned into a Brexit wake, instead. Our hosts graciously gave up on any pretence of gaiety as we mourned the sorry result collectively as Europeans.

Then both for British citizens on the Continent as well as E.U. citizens in the U.K. the long and excruciating wait and see began. I, like many others: anxiously followed every twist and turn in the Brexit saga as it unfolded; analysed its implications and tried to forecast what might come next. For a long time, Brexit was on everyone’s mind and lips. There was a silver lining though as this period also marked the beginning of new friendships as Brits on the Continent and E.U. citizens in the U.K. and on the Continent came together to make sure we had a voice in the game of realpolitik that was sure to follow with us as potential pawns. And then there was the rise of the pro-E.U. grassroots movement in the U.K. with many young people actively joining the cause to reclaim their future within the E.U. Personally, I found that keeping faith with the powers that be in the E.U. and keeping busy with a long list of Brexit related “things to do” proved to be rather empowering.

To be honest, I still cannot believe that the U.K. is leaving the E.U. I’m waiting to see if there is another vote and if so, then maybe, just maybe, we might decide to stay after all. Wouldn’t that be just marvellous».

\*Mark :

How does it feel to be living the Brexit process as a UK official in the Commission? Well, there are professional and personal aspects. On the professional side, it has been pretty bad for me. Brexit is important in the area I work on and has a knock-on effect on many issues. My managers decided to completely shut me out from all discussion of Brexit-related issues. I also had a UK dossier that was not Brexit-related taken away from me. It was pretty awkward for colleagues as they did not know whether they could discuss the file with me or not. There are files on the shared drive I cannot access. Things are a bit better now that the Withdrawal Agreement is finalised. But I am concerned, that when the negotiations on the Future Agreement start, the sensation of not being trusted on anything related to the UK will start again. Commissioner Oettinger has been clear that formal conflict of interest rules will apply to UK officials once the transition period is over and he even said that this could spill over to things like negotiations with the US on similar issues. I hope these conflict rules will be set out in writing unlike the current situation.

On a personal front, the most tedious thing is that people ask me all the time if I have changed my nationality. I don't have an Irish Granny, no! And for some officials, who worked in Belgium before they became officials, there is a financial cost to becoming Belgian. In addition, people outside the Commission regularly expect that I will be going back to the UK when Brexit happens: I always have to explain that the Commission took a decision that officials could remain in their posts. I don't really know if I will go back to the UK now: it's not very attractive! I have become a "citizen of nowhere". My daughter studies in the UK and I am concerned, for example, that her degree won't be recognised in other EU countries when she graduates. As for her younger brother, it is all up in the air as to whether we let him go to university in the UK now. We need to wait and see what happens. In the meantime, my son will suffer due to the reduction in the number of native English-speaking teachers in the European School. His best friend in school will leave at the end of March: his mother is going back to the UK due to Brexit. Despite the date being changed, they are still leaving. So that is sad too.

\*Susan :

On the day of the results, when the slight majority of the British voted to leave the EU, I felt embarrassed to be British for the first time in my life. It was a stark reminder to me also that I had even less in common with this “greater” proportion of my fellow countrymen - that I was not only geographically, but more importantly, mentally, far removed from them now.

I put the result down to the lethal combination of the lack of information about what the EU does reaching the eyes of the British, and the power of the press. The power of the British press serves for both the good and the bad. For the good - it highlights corruption (that some other countries continue to have a bigger issue with) and even goes so far as to seek it out in some cases. And for the bad - if the only source of information that the man in the street has about the EU comes from newspapers whose articles consistently start with “Brussels says we must....” making the EU the scapegoat for anything negative (I’m surprised that Brussels has not yet been blamed for any bad British weather), then we cannot perhaps be so surprised by the BREXIT result. Sadly, it seems that the very people that voted for BREXIT, those that read and take as gospel certain British newspapers, will be most negatively affected by it (the car factory worker for example that was so keen to vote for BREXIT as soon as voting opened).

On a personal level, having passed the

Interestingly, since the BREXIT vote, another British fonctionnaire that I know asked me if I had ever noticed that the British fonctionnaires were amongst those with the strongest work ethic, amongst the most professional, amongst the most conscientious and most reliable. For someone who has no hesitation in being critical of a proportion of her fellow countrymen, I can honestly say that yes, on reflection, this person is totally right - it’s true (from what I know, I might add).

One way or another, the subject of BREXIT rears its ugly head each day. I feel that I have enough issues to think about and deal with without it.

However, thinking with a broader mind, which working for the EU has helped me to do, I can finally conclude that BREXIT is in some ways a “luxury” problem in my life. I am not dying of hunger and if I lose my job, will doubtless get another eventually. I am not living in a war zone and having to leave my home with nothing. I am not the victim of a natural disaster. These are examples of the very issues that Britain as part of the EU and therefore with the EU should be putting their energies and economies into, rather than wasting them on BREXIT. For yes, we must indeed be “united in **diversity**” among ourselves and be proud to do so. More importantly, however, both within the EU and on the world stage, we must ultimately and above all, be “united in **adversity**”.

conours (after studying hard for it), being a Fonctionnaire gave me a certainty and so an area of my life over which I had gained control. While other areas of my life remained without my full control (health, relationships etc.). Thus, I felt angry that something I had worked hard for and that had seemed a certainty in my life was suddenly put at risk and even worse, an area of my life that was now totally out of my control.

\*Names have been changed upon request of our colleagues.

**TAO-AFI** understands the human aspect of this complicated issue and remains supportive to all.



Executive committee

**TAO-AFI**

*Your TAO-AFI team: Raúl Trujillo Herrera, Rosario de Simone, Marco de Stefano,  
Juan Luis Barbolla Casas, Gillian More, Cristina Perret, Katarzyna Rybak*

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**TAO-AFI, The Association of Independent Officials**

Joseph II 70 street, 01/208 at 1049 Brussels Tel: 02/29 62589 – fax : 02/29 64325  
Osp-Tao-Afi@ec.europa.eu

[www.tao-afi.eu](http://www.tao-afi.eu)