

German ambassador: second world war image of Britain has fed Euroscepticism

Exclusive: Peter Ammon says some Brexiters were motivated by a sense of national identity built around UK standing alone



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The image of Britain standing alone in the second world war against German domination has fed Euroscepticism in the UK, but does little to solve the country's contemporary problems, the outgoing German ambassador to London has told the Guardian.

Dr Peter Ammon described the UK's decision to leave the EU as "a tragedy" and a depressing moment, but also warned that Britain had "illusions" about the Brexit talks.

"If you have illusions about what you can negotiate, then it is very difficult. You end up in a divorce in which you say: 'It was always your fault,' and you find some example, and start a blame game," he said.

In a valedictory interview, Ammon, who is due to retire from Germany's diplomatic service this month after holding the posts of ambassador to Paris, Washington and London, also told the Guardian:

Britain is likely to lose international influence as a result of Brexit.

High levels of immigration into the UK from the EU, one of the key drivers of Brexit, are coming to an end because of higher growth in the EU.

No offer will be available to the UK that is a halfway house between the situations of Canada and Norway.

Ammon said Britain was rightly proud of its history, but some Brexiters were motivated by a sense of national identity built around Britain standing alone in the second world war.

With British cinemas full of films such as Darkest Hour and Dunkirk, Ammon said: “History is always full of ambiguities and ups and downs, but if you focus only on how Britain stood alone in the [second world] war, how it stood against dominating Germany, well, it is a nice story, but does not solve any problem of today.

“I spoke to many of the Brexiteers, and many of them said they wanted to preserve a British identity and this was being lost in a thick soup of other identities. Obviously every state is defined by its history, and some define themselves by what their father did in the war, and it gives them great personal pride.”

He described the perception that Germany dominates the EU as “a horrible story”.

“When I tell people in Germany I am confronted by this narrative occasionally in public debates they say: ‘This cannot be true. You are joking. This cannot be true. That is absurd,’” he said.

Ammon said he had great confidence in Britain, but he feared its “influence will be diminished” after Brexit.

Ammon identified three illusions or concerns that needed to be addressed to prevent a breakdown in the talks, relating to the benefits of future UK free trade deals, the Irish border and the terms of a specific UK-EU free trade deal.

“The idea that there is in future a bonanza or a pot of gold somewhere through free trade agreements with third parties seems fanciful,” he said.

“The idea that you leave the customs union because the customs union would forbid you from entering separate free trade agreements with third countries concerns me. What happens if, as is likely, Britain comes back from these negotiations and says: ‘What I have got here is not very spectacular’? What I fear is there will be a blame game for this non-success. It will be explained as “something the Europeans have done”.

The ambassador is doubtful that the UK will be able to negotiate free trade deals with countries such as South Korea that are better than those the EU currently enjoys.

He also questioned how the issue of the UK’s border with Ireland could be resolved if the UK was outside the customs union. “There may be a desire on both sides not to have a border, but, without being in a customs union, I cannot see how to have no border.”

He said: “The idea Britain can pick somewhere between a free trade deal combining elements of the Norway model and the Canada model will not work because the single market is built on a balanced agreement with the objective of creating a level playing field.”

He also questioned whether immigration levels into the UK from the EU, one of the drivers of the Brexit vote, were any longer a problem.

“I have heard officials here say we are now at zero net migration from Europe so the issue

seems to have gone. Instead people are desperate for plumbers and health service staff from eastern Europe, so from the outside, you wonder why people now worry. I would worry more about the shortage of staff.”

Ammon notes that the UK’s business leaders and the Labour party seem to be moving to a similar stance on staying in the EU customs union, but says he does not detect a sea-change in the British public mood on Brexit, and does not see a way for Europeans to persuade the British to rethink the decision.

“It is a delicate issue. I wish we could do something,” he said. “The British people would not be happy particularly for the Germans to tell them what to do. This is a proud country, and rightly so. But the political assessment across Europe is that there would be no problem if Britain wanted to stay.”

Ammon was German ambassador during some of the talks between EU leaders and the former British prime minister David Cameron in 2015 on the possibility of reforms that could have led to terms for Britain staying in the EU. But he says he does not think a more generous German offer would have changed the referendum outcome.

“I don’t think an emergency brake [on EU immigration] would have solved the problem for those who wanted to define their identity and those that wanted to protest. It would have been impossible to communicate it. There was so much propaganda in the media - I am sorry, I cannot call it anything else.”

Brexit, he said, was part of a wider, international populist revolt against politicians.

“Populism provides easy and understandable answers to very complex problems,” Ammon said. “If you say the words ‘single market’ or ‘customs union’ probably 99% of the population would not understand, but if you say: ‘Let us build a wall to stop these immigrants,’ people say: ‘OK, that will probably help.’ I know it is not a good answer to problems - Germany has not had a good experience with building walls.”

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