

Reasonable anger is justified, and Xavier Bettel suffer...

Published: January 13, 2026, 6:01 am

Xavier Bettel is the prime minister of Luxembourg. [And yesterday he got angry.](#) Superficially he was angry with Boris Johnson, who had refused to take part in a pre-arranged open-air press conference. But that, I am quite sure is not the whole reason for his anger. Bettel has a reputation for being easy-going and slow to anger. That he was the EU prime minister to show his frustration says something is seriously amiss.

And of course, it is. It is entirely reasonable for the member states of the EU to be angry with the UK. Our ministers have proved to be incompetent negotiators. They have not known what they have wanted. As a result they have not known how to achieve their goals. As a consequence they have made tactical errors, and maybe made inappropriate concessions without even appreciating why. And they have then been unable to deliver on a deal that the EU negotiated in good faith and with competence. Subsequently, the UK's ministers have lied and prevaricated, but done nothing constructive to address the issues.

Yesterday the resulting anger flowed over. Dealing with perpetual incompetence is very hard, in itself. Dealing with bombast, hubris and even straightforward lying from the incompetent party is harder still. The EU's member states have had to suffer that from our ministers. And a point was reached when something had to be said.

It appeared that point was reached yesterday. I think that was appropriate. There is a time when, just occasionally the right thing to do is make clear you've had enough. It is then quite acceptable to make clear there are boundaries and to do so in no uncertain terms. The incompetent party has to be told that it is they who have to put matters right, and it is they who is at fault. That is not bullying. Nor is it aggression. It is simply making clear that for a relationship to exist there has to be mutual respect and that the incompetent party is failing to deliver that, precisely because it has not made the effort to be competent. That is not just disrespectful: when competence should be expected of those being disrespectful it is abusive. It might even be described as passive-aggressive bullying, precisely because it is intended to provoke a reaction.

The UK has its reaction. I suspect Dominic Cummings will think that this is something to celebrate. Actually, it's evidence of the national humiliation we are enduring. If Brexit had to be done, the least that could be asked was that it was done well. But it has not been, and not by a very long way. We set out on a path without knowing why and to where it might lead. Those engaged for the UK did not address the issues and did not appraise the risks correctly. Now they are floundering, very badly, and the world has had enough. It will only get worse from here.

Xavier Bettel was right to get annoyed yesterday. And he was right to show it. He will not be the last to do so.