

A deep and special fantasy world

Following the return of MPs to Parliament after the Easter Recess, their responses to recent Brexit developments will be closely watched. The lack of anger from Tory MPs thus far has been disappointing. The surrender on fishing in the draft transitional agreement has greatly upset the fishing community. It poses the question as to whether it would be right to sacrifice one of our historic industries even if we did end up with an all-singing, all-dancing deal at the end of 21 months. To destroy our fishing industry for a pure illusion is even worse, but this is what our government seems to be doing.

The “deep and special” relationship between the EU and the UK exists only in the minds of a few UK politicians; it is certainly not how the EU views its future links with a departing member state whose decision to leave the bloc was one of the biggest body blows it has ever faced.

Last week, David Davis announced plans to send “hundreds” of civil servants to Brussels to work on the deal. Within days, a senior EU source announced that this wasn’t going to happen. “There will be no negotiation strands, no ‘hundreds’ of British negotiators,” said an un-named diplomat. “Trade negotiations will not start properly until after 29 March 2019. Before that we must get the fundamentals right,” the source said.

One important, unresolved issue is the status of Gibraltar, with Michel Barnier indicating that Spain will enjoy strong support from the other EU member states. Spain’s demands include the joint control of Gibraltar’s airport, cross-border cooperation on smuggling and ending what it sees as a tax haven with far lower corporation rates.

Yesterday's Parliamentary written questions laid bare the depths of unreality which still pervade our government. Steve Baker, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, was anything but clear when questioned by the Labour MP Paul Blomfield. When discussing the transitional period, he said "The agreement will be underpinned by a duty of good faith and governed by a Joint Committee to ensure it is faithfully and fully implemented by both sides." As John Ashworth of Fishing for Leave asked, "Since when have the EU run on good faith?" Mr Baker also went on to say, "As we move towards our future partnership with the EU, we will need to discuss how we manage the relationship once we are two separate legal systems." The legal divergence begins on 29th March 2019, when "the treaties will cease to apply" to the UK. There still seems very little idea, from the UK point of view, how the UK will relate to the EU in the transitional period from a legal point of view. We may keep our laws in step with Brussels but they will have a different legal basis.

Discussions on Brexit in the House of Lords revealed the same sense of muddle. Questioned by Lord Taylor of Warwick, Lord Callinan said, "During the implementation period the UK will be in a continued close association with the EU Customs Union. This will ensure a smooth exit and minimise disruption for businesses. HMRC are confident that they are on track to deliver the functioning customs, VAT and excise regimes the UK will need once it leaves the EU." It is hard to share HMRC's confidence, especially as far as the Irish Border issue is concerned.

It is becoming apparent to anyone following these negotiations that the performance of Mrs May and David Davis has been completely pathetic. The EU has walked all over them. We can but hope that opposition from Brexit-supporting MPs within their party is merely dormant and that they will make it loud and clear that they will not support the proposed arrangements, including the terms for a transitional deal, nor the surrender on fishing nor, indeed, the proposed close military cooperation. Sooner or later, it will dawn on them

that their party will pay heavily for a botched Brexit. it is in everyone's interest for that moment to arrive as quickly as possible so that there is time to change tack.

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