

And they're off!

Today, our formal negotiations to leave the EU begin in Brussels. David Davis is meeting with Michel Barnier, the EU's chief negotiator. Mr Davis said he is beginning his task "in a positive frame of mind".

So there is finally something concrete to report after a ten days of confusion and speculation since the inconclusive General Election result. This, however, is where the certainty ends. It is almost a year since the Brexit vote and we do not know the shape of the planned Brexit deal. Of course, it is quite possible that this is a deliberate strategy to "keep our power dry". Daniel Hannan, writing in the Daily Mail, claims that the Civil Servants have "had a year to prepare for these talks, and have put it to good effect.

We must hope so, but detail is thin on the ground. Although Philip Hammond, the Chancellor, has been widely reported as supporting ongoing membership of the Customs Union, he recently insisted that this was not the case. Speaking on the Andrew Marr Show, he said, "And by the way, we'll be leaving the customs union. The question is not whether we're leaving the customs union, the question is what do we put in its place." The subject of the customs union was barely mentioned in the referendum campaign last year. It has always been a red herring. For all the otherwise mixed messages of last year's assorted leave campaigns, virtually everyone was agreed that freedom to determine our trading arrangements would be one of the principal benefits of Brexit and that remaining in the Customs Union would place unacceptable restrictions on any such future arrangements.

The Single Market is another matter, however. Mr Hammond also insisted that we would be leaving this too. Fair enough, but it would be good to know what sort of relationship exactly he and the Civil Servants have agreed to seek if they are to

avoid what he called “those cliff edges.”

He also hinted that some transitional arrangement would be sought. “We will need some kind of transitional structures and the European Union needs to understand that as well. This is not a British ask or a British demand, it’s a statement of common sense, that if we’re going to radically change the way we work together we need to get there via a slope, not via a cliff edge. That’s good for business on both sides of the English Channel.” He appeared to rule out remaining in the customs union, even as part of a transitional arrangement, but was vaguer about the Single Market – deliberately so? We will no doubt know more in due course.

This does pose the question about how much influence say he, or even Mrs May, will have. The loss of the Tories’ overall majority leaves the government more beholden to Parliament – including Tory backbenchers – than before. Some have gone on record – anonymously – that any backpedalling on, or dilution of Brexit by the Prime Minister will result in a leadership challenge.

Mrs May will therefore have her work cut out to appease some more hard line Brexiteers, but on the other hand, she will need to keep on board those MPs are less enthusiastic about leaving the EU, who will doubtless seek to exploit any features of the end deal which would negatively affect the economy in general and jobs in particular.

Labour, however, says it will not seek to derail Brexit. During the election campaign, Jeremy Corbyn was campaigning for a different sort of Brexit but never offered any hint that he would try to undermine it. There are two issues at play here. First, personally, Mr Corbyn has never been a supporter of the EU project. As we have pointed out, his contribution to the remain campaign was at best lukewarm and in reality, a negative one. More to the point, outside the big cities, support for Brexit was strong in Labour-voting constituencies

and Corbyn and his team rightly realised that unless he emphasised his commitment to Brexit, votes – and potentially seats – could be lost in the constituencies which historically have been Labour's heartland. This tactic succeeded and consequentially, those Labour MPs who dislike both Corbyn and Brexit must realise that their room for manoeuvre is rather limited given that their party did much better than was widely predicted two months ago.

Emmanuel Macron, the seemingly all conquering French President, insisted that "the door remains open" to the UK abandoning Brexit and remaining in the EU. Dan Hannan strongly rebutted this offer. "The idea that Britain might crawl back to Brussels, apologising for its mistake, shows an extraordinary misreading of our character, our history – and public opinion," he wrote.

It's not just our history and character. One does not often find oneself in agreement with John Major, but during a recent interview on BBC's Radio 4, he made the point that the EU has never really been a big priority for most UK voters. Ask any veteran UKIP candidate or even the Lib Dems, whose pitch to the supposed "48%" in the recent General Election campaign fell rather flat, and they would concur 100%. A vocal minority notwithstanding, most people, whichever way they voted in June last year, just want the government to get on with it.

And this is what it is finally doing. We can but hope that everyone will be satisfied with the result.

Photo by rogerblake2

