

# Brexit – no U-turns

We are still only in the preliminary stages of the Brexit negotiations. It has taken a long time to get to this point and Mrs May has already faced a tough battle to reach the point where Article 50 could be triggered. Still, so far, she has delivered. She promised that this would happen before March 2017 and in spite of the legal challenges and the opposition of some MPs along with considerably more Lords, she has been as good as her word.

The battles which lie ahead will be harder still. Even if there is a desire for an amicable agreement on both sides, a seamless exit from the EU with our trade virtually unaffected was always going to be a tall order within the two-year timescale of Article 50.

In calling a General Election, Mrs May had made life somewhat easier for herself at home. By March 2019, campaigning would already have begun if the most recent parliament had run its full term and the UK electorate would have been preparing to head to the polls in May 2020. Assuming the polls are correct and she wins a further mandate, she will have a couple of extra years' breathing space if a transitional deal becomes an essential part of the exit route or else both her government and the EU agree on an extension to the negotiating period.

Failure, however, is not an option. Her party still has a massive uphill struggle to regain the trust of many Eurosceptic voters, some of whose memories go back to Edward Heath's betrayals in the early 1970s and the bully-boy tactics used by John Major to railroad the Maastricht Treaty through Parliament in 1992. When Mrs Thatcher's eyes were opened to the true nature of the European project, it was not Labour or Lib Dems but Tory grandees like Michael Heseltine and Geoffrey Howe who stabbed her in the back and engineered her downfall.

Thankfully, the recent Tory intakes of 2010 and 2015 have tipped the balance and while withdrawalists were still a minority among the party's MPs in last year's referendum campaign, there are plenty of Conservative anti-EU voices in Parliament whose commitment to withdrawal is every bit as strong as that of the most ardent "kipper". Any back-tracking by Mrs May would rip her party apart – and she knows it.

On a more positive note, wrapping up the EU issue once and for all, laying to rest a running sore within her party which has festered for decades. It would be hugely beneficial electorally, rendering the Lib Dems totally irrelevant while causing many former UKIP voters to ask what the party they once supported now stands for.

So what is Mrs May up against in Brussels? The European Council met at the end of last month and its guidelines are published here. Agreement must be completed on three initial areas – the Irish border, the UK's contribution to the EU budget and the rights of EU citizens living in the UK – before discussions on the framework for a future EU-UK relationship.

The divorce talks will take place between the UK and an organisation whose reputation for bureaucracy is rooted in the top-down approach to law and government which characterises many of the member states. Our history is very different. We have been far less likely to legislate to the same degree or in the same sort of detail as our continental neighbours. This dislike of pages of small print has been something of a handicap throughout our sad 44 years as an EU member state. During his time as Prime Minister, John Major was once told by Germany's former Chancellor Helmut Kohl to "go and read the treaties." UK politicians, even Prime Ministers, have historically had little idea about what they are signing up to. Unlike their Continental counterparts, they don't do detail when it comes to the EU.

Mrs May has a reputation for being good at detail, so while

Jean-Claude Juncker, the Commission President, may be right in general terms when he said that “I have the impression sometimes that our British friends do underestimate the technical difficulties we have to face,” we can but hope that in the period since becoming Prime Minister, Mrs May has assembled a team around her who, we hope, are preparing to get to grips with the complexities of the negotiations which lie ahead.

On the face of it, the EU is merely requesting the UK to work through a number of technical issues which need to be addressed to ensure a smooth divorce and can therefore claim that it has no wish to punish the UK – just merely to conduct a separation according to a set of rules to which everyone, including the UK, has agreed.

But is this really an accurate picture? Or will the EU set out to make us as miserable as possible while still claiming to be acting according to the rules?

Yanis Varoufakis, the former Greek Finance minister who resigned when his party leader caved in to demands for more austerity, says that Mrs May should avoid negotiating with the EU at all cost. “If she doesn’t do that she will fall into the trap of Alexis Tsipras {Greece’s Prime Minister}, and it will end in capitulation,” he told the Daily Telegraph.

“They will give you the EU run-around. You won’t always know exactly who to talk to and that is deliberate. When you make a moderate proposal they will react with blank stares and look at you as if you were reciting the Swedish National Anthem. It is their way of stonewalling.” Professor Varoufakis has suggested that the UK should adopt the EEA/EFTA route, or “Norway Option”, as a transitional arrangement as “they could not refuse this. They wouldn’t have a leg to stand on.”

Mrs May has ruled this out in her utterances so far, although she has not ruled out a transitional arrangement nor given

away much detail as to what this might mean.

Varoufakis' unhappy experience with the EU is not unique. One country has left the European project – Greenland. The EEC (as it then was) was distinctly uncooperative and only when the Greenland government threatened to prevent all EEC boats from fishing in its waters on independence that a deal was finally agreed.

Some economists, notably Professor Patrick Minford of Cardiff University Business School, said that Mrs May and her government need to have a fall-back option if negotiations fail. His proposal is truly radical – unilateral free trade with no tariffs whatsoever. Ambrose Evans-Pritchard called it a “heady Cobdenite manifesto” – and a world apart from Varoufakis' suggestion.

Mrs May, who was accused by one EU diplomat of living in a “different galaxy”, has indicated that she is not going to be cowed by the EU. On last Sunday's Andrew Marr show, she said “I am not in a different galaxy. I think what this shows, and what some of the other comments we've seen coming from European leaders shows, is that there are going to be times when these negotiations are going to be tough.” She is unquestionably correct in this assertion.

She has, nonetheless, a strong hand in a few areas, notably fishing, where lack of a deal would hurt the EU more than our fishermen. Security too is not an area the EU would want to leave unresolved, We have the most proficient counter-terrorism operational capability of any state in Europe, according to Veterans for Britain. Indeed, it is the five Anglophone nations or “Five Eyes” – the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, whose intelligence sharing does more than anything else to keep the Western nations safe. The EU would not want to lose out on that link with our security services.

But one other important point is that it is not in the EU's interests to be seen as punishing us. If it really plays rough, we can let the whole world know. It cannot bully us as it did with Greenland and expect that such behaviour will be ignored by the world's media. Such behaviour, after all, would lump the EU in the company of the former Soviet Union, the Inquisition and North Korea as being insanelly hostile to dissent. At the same time it would send a message to the citizens of the other EU-27 that they are trapped and there is no way out – a recipe for a violent implosion at some point in the future. It would also cause accession states like Serbia and Albania to draw back while snuffing out the residual support for EU membership in countries like Norway and Iceland. In this country, any heavy-handed tactics by a German-led EU is likely to unite all but the most diehard remainiacs in a determination to support the Government in toughing it out in order to regain our freedom.

Some prominent withdrawalists have long claimed that Article 50 is a trap, although this has been refuted by other supporters of Brexit. We are about to find out who is right.