

Cameron's legacy of confusion

David Cameron didn't expect to lose last year's referendum and banned the Civil Service from devising any exit strategy. That became an excuse for a nine month gestation period by Mrs. May which delivered only repetitions of "Brexit means Brexit". The official leave campaign, vote.leave, refused to devise an exit strategy either. The only serious research on offer before the referendum which charted a comprehensive exit strategy was Flexcit, which recommended the EEA/EFTA route as a transitional arrangement. Since the referendum, only one further independent, detailed attempt has been made to tackle the issues involved – the Bruges Group's What will it look like? which claimed that another exit route was possible within the time limit, while recognising a number of potential obstacles.

A recent post by Sir Jeremy Heywood, the Cabinet Secretary and head of the Civil Service painted a very upbeat picture of the work being done by the newly-created Department for Exiting the EU but he didn't go into any detail about exit strategy. This department has far more staff available than the Bruges Group so it is rather worrying that we still know so little.

As our Chairman, Edward Spalton, has pointed out, when we joined the EEC in 1973, businesses were being briefed over a year in advance about the forthcoming changes. Recently, a number of businessmen who met with government ministers, including the Brexit secretary David Davis, were very concerned about the lack of detail they had been given. Similar reservations have come from groups ranging from the chemical manufacturers and the Federation of Small Business – the latter including a number of long-standing Brexit supporters.

Mr Davis unquestionably feels very confident about the UK's prospects outside the EU. In the long term he could well be

right. To be free of control by Brussels and able to manage our own affairs will be an inestimable benefit – but only if we are able to chart a sensible course through the choppy waters of what are shaping up to be far more complex negotiations than many Brexiteers ever imagined.

The stakes could not be higher for Mrs May and the Conservative Party. There will be no backing out of Brexit. Even though only a minority of MPs campaigned for leave, the majority of her party's activists are staunch leavers and would not countenance any sort of betrayal. The unexpectedly strong showing by Labour in last month's General Election only adds to the pressure. Any failure to deliver a competent Brexit as good as guarantees Mr Corbyn the keys to No. 10 in 2022 – or perhaps earlier.

Leaving the EU is the biggest challenge Mrs May and her team will face. We do not know what is going on behind the scenes but the government needs to have sufficient known policies in view to reassure the public, to avoid disrupting economic expectations and to deny traction to the campaign to rejoin the EU. Advice to all industries concerning the effects of government plans needs to be given in plenty of time for them to adjust.

To put it another way, our EU membership has been like a malignant, cancerous tumour. Untreated, it would have led to certain death. That's why we were right to vote to leave. However, the complex task of cutting it out should be done by a team of top surgeons who not only know what they are doing but can communicate their knowledge and confidence to the people. At the moment, even though there seems to be a growing agreement that some sort of transitional deal is necessary, no details at all have emerged.

Membership of the Single Market, even as an interim arrangement, has been ruled out and significantly, it was the Chancellor Philip Hammond, one of the "doves" in government,

who stated this explicitly on the Andrew Marr show last Sunday. So what will it include? Catherine McGuinness, the *de facto* leader of the City of London's municipal body, says Britain and the EU must agree the outlines of any transition before the end of the year or as many as 15,000 banking jobs could leave London.

The sense of lack of concentration was not helped by a picture of Michel Barnier and his EU team turning up for the second round of Brexit talks with great thick folders of notes while David Davis and his associates had none.

So will some positive signal emerge to calm worried businesses – and indeed, worried Brexit supporters? If so, the sooner the better, as the opponents of Brexit are gleefully cashing in on the lack of direction, communicated by default. Most people just want to see Brexit done and dusted with reasonable assurance of that steadily performing economy on which all our livelihoods depend.