

Cough, cough, but no new insights on Brexit

There were at least two statements about Brexit during the Tory conference which show that some at least within the party appreciate the seismic change that Brexit involves. Firstly, Philip Hammond, the Chancellor, said that Brexit was “one of the most challenging tasks ever faced by a peacetime government in Britain.” He is quite right there. Secondly, Jacob Rees-Mogg challenged Theresa May’s assertion that her government would not be “defined by Brexit.” It “is the defining political issue of our time and to pretend otherwise...is absurd”, he continued, comparing the changes Brexit would bring to the Great Reform Bill or the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

Again, all well and good, but we were expecting something more from the Prime Minister in her keynote speech, particularly more detail on what the route to Brexit was going to look like. Sadly, we were to be disappointed.

Mrs May reiterated that we would leave the EU in March 2019. No back-pedalling here or she is toast – and she knows it. She then continued “I know some find the negotiations frustrating, but if we approach them in the right spirit – in a spirit of cooperation and friendship, with our sights set firmly on the future – I am confident we will find a deal that works for Britain and Europe too. And let’s be clear about the agreement we seek.”

Oh no! Next came that awful phrase again “deep and special” – twice, in fact. Please bury this one, Mrs May. It’s just as bad as “strong and stable” which the voters found so unconvincing in June. It doesn’t reflect reality and sounds rather soppy. Mind you, what came next as she fleshed out this overworked cliché sounded rather familiar too:- “A partnership

that allows us to continue to trade and cooperate with each other, because we see shared challenges and opportunities ahead. But a partnership that ensures the United Kingdom is a sovereign nation once again. A country in which the British people are firmly in control." Once again, her statement begs the obvious question, "yes, but how are we going to get there?"

What is more, Mrs May ignored the unfortunate reality that negotiations on this partnership are not even going to be started any time soon. Yesterday, the European Parliament passed a resolution which stated that the "absence of any clear proposals has seriously impeded the negotiations". The Parliament is "of the opinion that in the fourth round of negotiations sufficient progress has not yet been made" in the three key areas. Of course, the resolution is significant but merely a non-binding expression of opinion, not having been introduced by the EU Commission.

Maybe a speech at a party conference is not the best occasion for announcing a new initiative on Brexit to unblock the talks, but when exactly will the moment come? Her words on Brexit today could have been cut and pasted from the Florence speech, which was received politely by the EU's leading lights who then pointed out that it gave little idea about the sort of deal Mrs May is seeking, both for the interim and longer term.

To be fair to the Prime Minister, she wasn't at her best, having to deal with a persistent cough and – as if that was not enough – a moronic intruder who somehow gatecrashed the meeting, handed her a P45 saying "Boris made me do it." However, the issue goes deeper – and affects not only the Prime Minister but, it seems, a considerable number of Members of Parliament – they still fail to understand what the EU project is all about.

During the German General Election, one politician, when asked

about Brexit, said he regretted that the UK always viewed the EU as an economic rather than a political project, this failing to see its value – at least in his eyes. This man, whether by accident or not, has hit the nail on the head. It explains why we are getting two different pictures from the UK and the EU side whenever they report on the current negotiations.

To put it simply, the UK negotiators (and, I would suspect, Mrs May), are viewing these negotiations through this same historic mindset. The EU must want a trade deal with us because surely it would be foolish not to. Look at how their businesses would suffer without one. Therefore, if we complete the repatriation of the *acquis* by Brexit day, there should be no reason why should we not trade as before – well, more or less – as there will still be regulatory convergence.

The EU's reply, reiterated *ad nauseam* by Michel Barnier, is that we will be a third country on 29th March 2019. We will be outside the EU's political bloc, whose ongoing integrity matters far more than trade deals. If the EU was prepared to reduce Greece to poverty – and Greece wasn't even talking about leaving the EU – why should it put trade before politics in the Brexit negotiations? To repeat, for us, it's all about trade whereas for the EU, it's all about politics. Even discussion of any interim arrangement needs to be viewed in that light. The EU simply will not let us enjoy two years as an honorary member of the club while outside the jurisdiction of the ECJ and refusing to continue to abide by the EU's free movement rules. It is another terrible and overused cliché, but only when our politicians can learn to see how the EU project is understood by the likes not just of Barnier, Juncker and Verhofstadt, but also of national leaders such as Merkel, Macron and even Varadkar – and realise that they are all more or less of the same opinion – will we be able to escape the “having cake but eating it” mindset which has so bedevilled the negotiations from the very start.

There are grounds for hope that at least some MPs are belatedly beginning to understand the nature of the EU, so I have been told, but they need to spread the word among their colleagues pretty quickly if we are to have any hope at all of leaving the EU in March 2019 with any sort of deal worthy of the name.

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