

# Deal or no deal? Some thoughts on last week's meeting

Last week I, along with about 90 other people, attended a conference entitled *Deal or no deal – what are the options?* hosted by David Campbell Bannerman MEP. I was very much hoping to hear something of the government's current thinking about the progress of the Brexit negotiations with the EU.

The opening speaker, Rt Hon Greg Hands MP, gave a very upbeat assessment of our trading opportunities post-Brexit. His department, he assured us, is ready, come what may. Nine new trade commissioners are to be appointed and our new tariff schedules are being prepared for the World Trade Organisation. At a time when protectionism is on the increase, there is considerable enthusiasm in some quarters (which he did not name) for a new independent UK to re-emerge as a champion of global free trade. He was adamant that all the major countries with whom the EU had signed trade deals were keen to continue a similar arrangement with us on Brexit.

One member of the audience expressed concern about how high standards in agriculture could be maintained if trade was to become freer. Mr Hands insisted that there would be no lowering of standards on food quality and we would not be flooded with poor-quality imports (Presumably a reference to chlorine-washed chickens about which there are currently many worries)

David Campbell Bannerman then introduced what he called the "Super Canada" option which, he claimed, was the Government's preferred option. This was no surprise, given that a few days beforehand, the EU was widely reported as considering a deal along the lines of CETA, the EU/Canada deal, with the UK. This

has been strongly criticised both by the left and by other informed commentators for its inadequacy. Mr Bannerman said that the EU likes the CETA deal and intends to use it as a template for future trade deals with Australia and New Zealand too, Twelve of the 30 chapters in this deal would need no change, he informed us. The others would not be suitable without re-writing, as we would (presumably) wish to protect the NHS. The EU is worried about the future UK attitude towards regulation, as it doesn't want to see us becoming the Singapore of the North Atlantic, an option enthusiastically supported by, among others, Owen Paterson, whose piece appeared, perhaps coincidentally, on the same day as this conference.

David Davis gave the keynote speech. He stated that he does not want to end up with no deal and is confident that we will get a deal. He pointed out the areas where progress had been made and insisted that our exit will be conducted in a smooth, orderly way.

There was, nonetheless, a possibility that we may not get a deal, but Whitehall was preparing for every eventuality.

Mrs May has consistently rejected using Norway as a model and Helle Hagenau, a familiar face to our more long-standing members, explained some of the pitfalls. Although advising against our staying in the EEA, however, she felt it was worth our re-joining EFTA as we needed some trading arrangement with the four EFTA countries once we leave. Switzerland is our sixth most important trading partner while bilateral trade with Norway was worth £18.57 billion in 2015. She did, however, mention that although EFTA courts are not bound to implement the ECJ rulings, , they were in fact doing so, even though the ECJ has no direct power to intervene in EEA matters and the actions of the EFTA court was an encroachment on the original basis of the EEA agreement. With the alleged indivisibility of the "Four freedoms" of the Single Market mentioned on a couple of occasions during the morning, I was

surprised that no one mentioned Liechtenstein's unilateral restriction on free movement of people at this point.

The final speaker was Rt Hon David Jones, who had formerly worked as a minister in DExEU (the Department for Exiting the European Union) who informed the meeting that any role for the ECJ in our affairs post-Brexit would be totally unacceptable to him and a number of his colleagues. If this meant we would leave with no deal, then as far as he was concerned, so be it.

Interestingly, little was said about the details of any transitional arrangement, which as we have pointed out, the EU is only prepared to offer us under terms which would see us still under the thumb of the ECJ. We can therefore presume that Mr Jones and a number of his colleagues will be equally opposed to any such arrangement.

Although only billed as a "comment" rather than a speech, the few words shared by Hans-Olaf Henkel of the BDI, the German equivalent of our CBI, were well received. Although he regretted our vote to leave the EU and still hoped Brexit wouldn't happen, he was most unimpressed with the way the EU was handling the negotiations. He referred in particular to the "divorce bill" which he regarded as unacceptable. He also said that Brexit was the fault of Brussels, although his statement that "you joined an EU of sovereign nations and suddenly someone decided to make a United States of Europe out of it" was a rather naive comment given the United States of Europe was always the destination of the European project, right from the days of Jean Monnet.

It was good to meet up with a number of colleagues from other campaign organisations, quite a few of whom I had not seen since the referendum. It was worth attending this meeting, although I came away with a clear sense that not everyone in the government is singing from the same songsheet, so perhaps the lack of a clear Brexit strategy is understandable given

the balancing act required to avoid a massive rebellion on the back benches.

Among the other attendees was Viscount Matt Ridley, whose rather witty comments on the conference may be of interest. They can be found [here](#).