

Groundhog Day

If you think you have read a post like this before, you're probably right. Another week of Brexit negotiations are about to begin which will almost certainly end with very little progress being made. A smiling David Davis will emerge in a few days' time and give a very upbeat assessment of the talks at a press conference while Michel Barnier, in guarded but polite language, will say that actually very little has happened which will enable the UK and the EU to get down to discussing any sort of future trade relationship.

It's rather like the film Groundhog Day where an American weatherman finds himself trapped in a time loop, repeating the same day over and over again, except there's an important difference: in the film, time basically stands still whereas the Brexit clock is ticking away.

To be more precise, Brexit day, 29th March 2019, will take place 1,010 days after our vote to leave on 23rd June last year. In exactly one month's time, November 9th 2017, four days after Bonfire Night, we will reach the halfway point and so far, there is no sign of any deal which will enable trade to flow seamlessly between the UK and the EU once we leave the EU.

Even the plans for a two-year transition will be going nowhere. Essentially, while Mrs May may be telling the EU that the ball is in their court, the EU is being asked to make an exception to its normal rules for the sake of a former member state which doesn't want to be part of the club any more. It is under no obligation to say yes – indeed, it has given every indication that it is not going to. Mrs May's speech in Florence did nothing to shift the predominant belief in Brussels and elsewhere that there was plenty of goodwill in it but little of substance which could unblock the negotiations in the three key areas where agreement must be reached before

trade talks can begin – the Irish border question, the divorce bill and the rights of EU citizens resident in the UK.

It may be a case that Mrs May is being advised to take a tough line in the hope that the EU will blink first. If so, she (and her advisors) are likely to be disappointed. Even so, the fallout from Mrs May's conference speech and the failed attempts to remove her have left her with no option but to ensure we leave the EU in March 2019. Grant Shapps, the former Tory Chairman who surfaced as the leader of the failed coup, did not raise Brexit as an issue, but Nadine Dorries, a consistent pro-Brexit Tory MP, claimed that the plan was to take Boris Johnson down with Theresa May and install a new pro-remain leader who would stop Brexit.

We will never know the truth of what went on in the aftermath of Mrs May's speech, but the strong support she has been given from pro-Brexit MPs conveys the implicit message that there can be no turning back,

So are we heading towards a no-deal situation when our delegation will walk away from the talks, blaming EU intransigence? Business leaders will not like this and will be lobbying hard to prevent such an outcome.

This leaves Mrs May caught between a rock and a hard place. Maybe she (or her advisors) still haven't grasped the political nature of the EU project. This is hardly her fault. From Edward Heath onwards, the wool has been pulled over the eyes of the UK so effectively that even serving MPs think that the EU is all about trade, which it isn't. If we are to believe those who know her well, she is typical of many Tories who have never been that bothered about the EU but was forced by Cameron and Osborne, along with a significant number of her colleagues, to come off the fence. One of our correspondents claims that at the dinner parties he hosted, Cameron and his henchmen described supporting leave as "xenophobic".

Indeed, if the finger of blame should be pointed at anyone, it is the dynamic duo who headed up the administration before June 23rd last year. Cameron and Osborne held a referendum they didn't expect to lose, trying to frighten the voters and intimidate their parliamentary colleagues so that the result would never be in doubt. So confident were they of victory that the Civil Service was banned from drawing up any exit plan. According to Craig Oliver, Cameron's spin doctor, Cameron arrived at Downing Street after the result was announced on 24h June saying almost jokingly "Well, that didn't go according to plan!"

Indeed it didn't and nor has the first 15 months of Mrs May's premiership. We can but hope that the next 15 months see some significant progress but as far as the current round of negotiations is concerned, few people will be holding their breath. She has been bequeathed a very difficult task by her predecessor and it may well take some further crisis before we start to see any real developments which will prevent the "cliff edge" that draws closer by the day and rightly concerns so many.

Photo by vastateparksstaff 