

No surprise, no progress.

Theresa May travelled to the European Council meeting last week in the hope of persuading the leaders of the other 27 member states that sufficient progress had been made on the three sticking points of the Irish border, the “divorce bill” alias the EU’s exit payment and the rights of EU citizens living in the UK. Any gambler could comfortably have bet on her being disappointed. The language on both sides was very polite, but all that has been agreed is to talk about talks.

If Mrs May or other members of her government had any hopes that a “divide and conquer” strategy would work, going over the head of Michel Barnier from the Commission, they must now be realising that it won’t work. For all the divisions within the EU, some of which we have mentioned here, when it comes to Brexit, there is unity. No trade talks until sufficient progress has been made on the three sticking points.

France’s President Macron said that there was still much work to be done on the financial commitment before trade talks can begin, adding: “We are not halfway there.” Such a statement can easily be married with the more positive tone from Council President Donald Tusk, whose denial that the talks were deadlocked contradicted a statement to this effect from Michel Barnier.

For anyone still muddled by contradictory reports in the media who is seeking final confirmation that the EU does not consider sufficient progress to have been made, this statement from the European Council says it all.

Mrs May is currently between a rock and a hard place. She may or may not decide to listen to the voices from within her own party telling her to walk away altogether, but one thing is for sure – she cannot stop the Brexit clock. Her loyalty to her own party cannot be questioned and she knows that any

attempt to backpedal would result in the Tories tearing themselves to pieces.

On the other hand, she cannot ignore the concerns expressed by businesses. It's not just government ministers and bloggers who are warning about aircraft not being able to take off after Brexit. Some UK airlines are preparing to warn their customers that flights booked after March 2019 may not take off and they will not pay compensation if planes are grounded. Meanwhile, the UK Chamber of Shipping has expressed similar concerns about the problems UK ports will face if there is no deal, calling such an outcome an "absolute catastrophe".

EU sources continue to express their belief that eventually a deal will be struck, even though some people such as Owen Paterson, a former cabinet minister, have said that no deal is "inevitable."

Who will be right? Unfortunately, Mrs May's charm offensive has achieved little. The EU is a very rules-based organisation and it is going to stick to the letter in the forthcoming negotiations. I may be wrong, and would be happy to be eating humble pie in 18 months, but I fear that unless our side really gets to grips with how the EU works, Mr Paterson may end up being correct by default.