

# Paved with good intentions?

If Mrs May hoped that her speech in Florence would unblock the Brexit talks, she must be feeling somewhat disappointed. Yesterday, Donald Tusk, the President of the EU Council politely welcomed its “constructive and more realistic tone” but then went on to say, “As you know, we will discuss our future relations with the United Kingdom once there is so-called ‘sufficient progress’. The two sides are working hard at it. But if you asked me and if today Member States asked me, I would say there is no ‘sufficient progress’ yet.”

Mrs May’s speech, as we mentioned recently, was optimistic in tone and stated very clearly that the EU had never really worked for us. It “never felt to us like an integral part of our national story” although she stressed her enthusiasm to work closely with it once we leave.

But what exactly would this new partnership look like? “The question is then how we get there: how we build a bridge from where we are now to where we want to be,” said the Prime Minister. Unfortunately, she failed to answer her own question, apart from stating that a transitional period would be needed and ruling out ongoing membership of the European Economic Area, even in the short term.

The speech encapsulated the problem with which the Government is struggling. Like Boris Johnson, Mrs May sounded very hopeful about the UK’s prospects post-Brexit. She is right to do so. We potentially have a great future as an independent nation. The problem is reaching this point with our economy intact. Daniel Hannan has recently joined in the trade debate, enthusing about the prospects for free trade once we’re out of the EU, but we keep coming back to the same question: **how are we going to leave?**

It isn’t helping that our team, led by David Davis, accepted

the EU's preconditions that discussions on a wider future relationship, including trade, cannot begin until "sufficient progress" has been made on the Irish border issue, the "divorce bill" and the rights of EU citizens currently living in the UK. Mrs May stressed that the EU needed to "be creative" in working out its future relationship with the EU, while David Davis insisted that there should be "no excuses for standing in the way of progress".

But even if the outstanding issues are resolved, and there is little sign of any meaningful agreement as yet, what sort of agreement exactly does the UK want? Michel Barnier, the EU's chief negotiator, has called for "a moment of clarity" from the UK's side. He is quite right to ask this question as there are plenty of us this side of the Channel who can't wait to see the UK safely out of the EU but at the same time are in a quandary regarding how the Government proposes to get us there. The hints in Mrs May's speech about the sort of transitional arrangement she would like suggest somehow more or less staying in the EU but somehow not being subject to the European Court of Justice – in other words, still in "having cake and eating it " territory and thus unacceptable to the EU.

Scan through our website and read the comments on earlier articles and you will find a few people doubting if Brexit will ever happen and fearful that Mrs May is going to betray us and call the whole thing off. While fully appreciating the anxiety of such people, I do not believe this to be remotely possible. The slightest hint of back-peddalling on Brexit and Mrs May would immediately face a leadership challenge. What is more, the Tories garnered much of the leave vote in last June's General Election because they promised to deliver on Brexit. Following the better-than-expected showing by Labour under Jeremy Corbyn, a botched or half-baked Brexit means electoral meltdown for the Tories and they know it.

Mrs May and her team are therefore under great pressure. There

is no turning back, whatever some sections of the press may say – or indeed, secretly wish for. One possible scenario is that Mrs May and David Davis may pull out of the talks, blaming EU intransigence and falling back on the “no deal is better than a bad deal” position – in other words, the so-called WTO option. Iain Duncan Smith, among others, has been urging the government to prepare for no-deal.

It probably won't come to this, but we can expect a rocky road ahead in the next few weeks, especially as much of the business world does not share the optimism of Mr Duncan Smith or Professor Patrick Minford that the WTO option, coupled with a more or less total elimination of tariffs, is going to be beneficial. In the long term it may be, but the shock it would deliver to UK businesses in the immediate post-Brexit period would be immense with, among other things, the likelihood of a massive stack of lorries on the M20 building up the moment we leave, unable to clear French customs due to a lack of the necessary paperwork.

So the Brexit clock keeps ticking and M. Barnier keeps reminding us that we will become a “third country” in just over 18 months time. Given it's now more than 15 months since the Brexit vote, we are only six weeks or so away from the halfway point between the referendum and the result we sought. We can but hope that some sort of clarification or change of tack will take place soon or the dream for which so many of us campaigned for so long may turn out, in the short term at least, to be more of a nightmare. The road to Hell, they say, is paved with good intentions. The road to Brexit may turn out to be very similar.