A project management view of Brexit

There must be a beginning of any great matter, but the continuing unto the end until it be thoroughly finished yields the true glory. Sir Francis Drake, 1587

As Mrs May's intrepid Brexit negotiating team set fair for Brussels, carrying with them the hopes and fears of our realm, are they mindful of the six stages of many major projects? These are often written as:

1. *Enthusiasm,*
2. *Disillusionment,*
3. *Panic and hysteria,*
4. *Hunt for the guilty,*
5. *Punishment of the innocent, and*
6. *Reward for the uninvolved.*

Undoubtedly within their midst must be a project manager (or perhaps a project management team) well experienced in delivering complex projects for difficult customers on short timescales to wide-ranging specified requirements and within tight budgets. He (or she or perhaps, they) will have his/her/their work cut out.

Brexit, especially the route the government has, for now, chosen) is a complex process requiring a multitude of different strands, including other associated and critical projects, to be pulled together. Worse, much is actually outside our direct control, involving activities 'over there' in the European Commission, European Parliament, and government departments or ministries within the 27 remaining Member States. And even these will probably be receiving input from European Union (EU) agencies and external organisations (such as trade or commerce organisations) as well. Herding the contents of a sizeable African game park or

engineering a trip to Mars would probably be simpler and more predictable than project managing this lot.

Brexit, then, needs great project and process management. Unfortunately these are things we traditionally don't do that well, relying instead on muddling through, a process of centralised micromanagement by a 'great leader' and minds being concentrated at the last moment. And our governments usually talk down the difficulties (and costs) involved in any major project, until bitten really hard by the facts on the ground. Think of the Millennium Dome, the NHS and HMRC Information Technology projects or the Nimrod AEW3 airborne early warning (surveillance) project? To make matters worse, we often go for 're-inventing the wheel' — and then find that it doesn't work at the first attempt anyway.

Rather than try to project manage Brexit in its current form with all the complexity, unknowns and risks involved, much can be done to make the task easier and, therefore, the end result more likely to meet or even exceed expectations. Here is a helpful checklist:

- be realistic about what can or cannot be achieved in a given timescale
- take out as much of the complexity as possible and get control of as much of the overall project (including the EU's contribution) as possible
- find adequate, experienced, competent resources rather than ending up surrounded by sycophantic Yes-men (or women) or Yes Minster (Sir Humphrey Appleby) obstructionists
- plan and programme before rushing in
- monitor and predict the problem areas/activities well in advance and then proactively solve them
- adapt and respond quickly when the unexpected occurs — as it surely will,
- identify and attenuate undesirable/unwanted consequences (collateral damage)

- avoid fudges or letting incomplete or wrong work carry on (as they will come back to bite you later)
- use proven standardised methods, products and solutions, wherever practicable
- to communicate and listen to the messenger rather than shooting him or her when the message is unpalatable
- watch out for the subtle confidence tricks such as nonsensical excuses, playing politics and 'moving the goalposts'
- watch out for members of the team changing sides through regular interaction with the other (EU) side (assuming they are actually on our side to begin with)
- keep good, traceable, up to date records from the very beginning.

This is pretty basic and obvious. There are plenty of standard techniques, textbooks and management tools around to help with project management. If the basics are not right, the more complex aspects become expensively ineffective.

Brexit involves negotiation which is widely assumed to require compromises such as meeting half way or *quid pro quo*. This can obviously set precedents that again come back later to bite hard. From a project management perspective, firm commitments and precise statements of the current status of the proceedings are more likely to lead to the desired outcomes — as far as our country's interests are concerned — being achieved. This is also called driving a hard bargain or "statecraft". Perhaps Mrs May already has an experienced mentor for this important art in Donald J Trump, who has had a many years' experience in dealing with truculent contractors and insular officialdom, having been taught some basic skills, on the job, by his redoubtable father.

All major projects eventually come to an end, usually in a far more imprecise and messy way than they started. And then the project team disbands, its members moving onto other things. Presumably the same will happen years hence for the Department

for Exiting the EU? – or perhaps not? There can't be many instances when civil servants have intentionally worked themselves out of a job in two years?

The final observation in this brief look at the project management of Brexit comes from Sir Francis Drake's motto – *Sic Parvis Magna*, translated literally, as: "Thus great things from small things (come)."