

Small teacup, big storm?

The agreement hammered out at Chequers last Friday went down like a lead balloon among Tory Brexit supporters. Here is the text of the final statement. Martin Howe QC, from Lawyers for Britain, produced a briefing which expressed grave concern that it would leave us tied in perpetuity to EU law and forced to accept binding rulings by the European Court of Justice.

The EU laws in question were those relating to goods, their composition, their packaging, how they are tested, etc etc, in order to enable goods to cross the UK/EU border without controls. This does, of course, raise the question as to how aware critics like Mr Howe actually are that many rules governing standards within the Single Market are not actually set by Brussels. The EU merely acts as a conduit for laws originating with global standards bodies to which we would have to be subject regardless of the Brexit model adopted.

Note the word “goods” rather than “trade”. Mrs May’s proposals would have seen the UK essentially remain in the single market for goods but not for services. This was never going to wash with the EU. as some commentators were warning within hours of the statement being released.

Its pie-in-the-sky nature did not stop a deluge of negative comment. A majority of Conservative Party members regarded it as a bad deal, so said Paul Goodman after conducting a snap poll for Conservative Home. More ominously, a poll commissioned by Change Britain suggested that a deal along the lines of that proposed by Mrs May would cost the Tories a lot of votes. For example, 32% of voters would be less likely to vote Conservative if the Government agreed a deal which results in UK laws being subject to rulings by EU courts and More than a quarter would be less likely to support the Conservative Party if a deal meant that the EU retained some or substantial control of the UK’s ability to negotiate our

own free trade agreements.

Still, if the EU's spokesmen had acted quickly to reject the deal out of hand, it would have been a storm in a teacup for the Tories, which would have blown over. Simon Coveney, the Irish Republic's Foreign Minister, said that Michel Barnier would find it "difficult " to accept the proposals. It is now quite probable that he won't have to do so as a crisis has erupted at the very heart of Mrs May's government. On Sunday night, David Davis resigned. Effectively sidelined by Olly Robbins for many months, the most surprising aspect of Mr Davis' announcement is that it has taken so long in coming. With him went his deputy Steve Baker. Mrs May reacted speedily and appointed Dominic Raab, a prominent Brexit supporter, to replace Mr Davis. However, within hours of Mr Davis going, Boris Johnson resigned as Foreign Secretary.

This means that a small teacup is producing what could turn out to be a considerable storm. Mrs May is due to meet her backbenchers later this evening and especially given her decision to brief Labour and Lib Dem MPs on her Brexit proposals, the mood is likely to be sombre if not angry.

One Labour source said of this meeting, "It's an opportunity to tell the PM's chief of staff why the Government has got it so wrong." With that, we would agree. Almost every government publication on the subject of Brexit is, at best muddled. The fisheries white paper also appeared last week – its publication somewhat overshadowed by the dramatic events following the Chequers meeting. We will provide some further comment on this later this week, but suffice it to say it seems very optimistic, ignoring the determination of the EU to preserve its access to our waters and to control the allocation of quota if it gets half a chance.

With events happening so quickly, it is impossible to predict whether Mrs May will face a leadership challenge or indeed whether the Brexit talks will break down. However, we have

been saying for some time that a crisis is essential if the disastrous Brexit plans hatched by Mrs May, including the fatally flawed transitional arrangements, are to be jettisoned. At long last, it looks like the crisis has arrived.