

Brexit gets more real, Brexiters get more unrealistic

Chris Grey's Brexit Blog
17 July 2020

This week, the practical realities of what Brexit is going to mean came into central focus for perhaps the first time, with a new [government information campaign](#). Although there have been earlier exercises in 'no deal' preparation – when that meant no Withdrawal Agreement – now the public are being told what ending the transition period that followed the Withdrawal Agreement (WA) will mean.

The Border Operating Model

Much of this will apply [whether that period ends with a trade deal or not](#) (i.e. 'no deal 2.0'). Given that, one might ask why it is only now, with less than six months to go, that these preparations are being communicated and in some cases being developed. For example, the [£705 million border investment just announced](#) was going to be needed anyway, as was the [huge lorry park in Kent](#) for which land has only just been purchased (it will be [one of over ten similar sites](#)). Moreover, despite Boris Johnson's bluster and lies, it has been known for months that new processes, which were [announced this week with the Border Operating Model](#), were going to be needed not just for UK-EU trade but for goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland yet the facilities for this are only now [beginning to be developed](#).

After all, it has been UK policy to leave both the customs union and the single market since January 2017. To have left matters so late is not just incompetence but, very likely, reflects the refusal to understand or accept that the result of that policy was necessarily going to entail increased border friction. That is politically significant because, recalling the circumstances of 2017-2019, it is at least conceivable that had the government admitted this, rather than pretending that a ["frictionless" trade deal was possible](#), the closely-fought battle over a second referendum would have gone the other way.

Not only is it very late in the day, with significant doubts as to whether [either the government IT systems or businesses will be ready in time](#), but also the new Border Operating Model is still very far from providing [all the information](#) that businesses will need in order to comply. For small trading businesses, in particular, this is an impossible situation in itself. Worse, as [the full complexity and costs \(£\)](#) become known some, at least, will simply cease to be viable, especially coming during the ongoing pandemic crisis. For those, large and small, that do continue these new costs will have to be absorbed in some way or passed on to customers.

The cost of customs

These costs – just as regards customs declarations, before any other costs are considered – will amount to [£7 billion a year \(£\)](#) to UK businesses trading with the EU, rising to [£13 billion \(£\)](#) when EU businesses trading with the UK are included. It's worth reflecting on these figures. They compare to the [approximately £9 billion net contribution the UK made to the EU in 2018](#). It's not a one-off, but a recurring annual cost. And, to repeat, it exists whether or not there is a trade deal – it is nothing to do with any tariffs that may be levied or any other trade barriers that may arise.

The slogan for the information campaign is [‘Let’s Get Going’](#), which some businesses might reasonably take as a suggestion to relocate abroad while there’s still time. Individuals might take it as cue to go on holiday but if so they, too, need to be quick as they are now having it spelled out in more detail what Brexit will mean for them [when they travel to the EU](#) in terms of new border controls, health insurance, and pet passports.

For those who have been paying attention, none of this will be a shock – although seeing the practical details of what it means may still be a surprise. For others, it may be puzzling. For they were told before the Referendum and ever since that such Brexit effects were just Project Fear, then that Brexit had been done on 31 January with no obvious changes, and throughout that a deal would be negotiated which – although the ‘exact same terms’ lie has been long ago dropped – by implication would mean things pretty much carrying on as normal.

In fact, many of the things [that remainers have long warned about](#) are set to happen. Perhaps this is why the government resolutely refuse to describe them [as being about Brexit \(£\)](#) but, instead, as “the UK’s new start”, a new start which is said to bring ‘exciting opportunities’. What these are has not been specified and there is a reason for that, too: [there are no exciting opportunities](#). It’s simply a self-inflicted change for the worse. A new start, perhaps, but the start of new barriers to trade and travel, new costs, new regulations and new bureaucracy resulting from leaving both the single market and the customs union. To coin a phrase, “only a madman would actually leave the market”. Britain is that madman.

What new madness is this?

The [speaker of those words](#) was, of course, Owen Paterson MP (whose explanation of the ‘madman’ comment is [here](#); apparently ‘leaving the market’ and ‘leaving the single market’ are different things, so now you know) who has cropped up again this week, being listed as one of the contributing authors of a new report by the Centre for Brexit Policy (of which he is also the Chairman). Entitled [‘Replacing the Withdrawal Agreement’](#), this is being widely publicized, [with coverage in the Daily Telegraph \(£\)](#) and of course [The Express](#), and a write-up by the Centre’s Director-General, John Longworth, [on the Politico website](#). So it has the look of a concerted campaign.

The report itself, as its title suggests, propounds the extraordinary idea that the government should unilaterally create a new ‘Sovereignty Compliant Agreement’ to replace the WA and present it to the EU. If they do not agree, the UK would no longer regard itself as being bound by the WA. The report lists many ways in which the WA is not ‘sovereignty compliant’, including the Northern Ireland Protocol, and within that the role of the ECJ, as well as the ECJ’s role with respect to Citizens’ Rights and other matters, and the size – and by implication even the existence - of the financial settlement. Contained within all this seems to be a bemusement that the terms of the WA hold whether or not there is a trade deal. The authors – and [David Davis in a tweet](#) endorsing them – seem to imagine that the withdrawal terms were contingent on the trade deal, reprising the [‘row of the summer’ of 2017](#) that Davis famously threatened and then lost (or didn’t fight) which has rankled with the Ultras ever since.

It’s important to be clear – and the report is – that this isn’t about questioning this or that detail within the WA, it is that “the entire WA and Protocol are incompatible with UK sovereignty” (p.7). They want to revisit every single part of the Article 50 negotiations. But those negotiations are over. Unsurprisingly, a [European Commission spokesperson](#) immediately ruled out a

renegotiation. The Longworth article gives full rein to the sentiments underlying this proposal: they are that the entire WA is a “poison pill” deriving from May’s lack of belief in Brexit, and the way her “government worked hand-in-glove with Remain elements of the British establishment and in cahoots with Brussels and foreign powers”. So Britain remains in “Teutonic chains” paying “reparations” and faces (yawn) a “Dunkirk” moment. It is a spectacularly vicious piece of writing.

Re-writing history

There are some very obvious problems with this proposal – even leaving aside [the legal issues involved in breaking the WA](#) - which involves a substantial re-writing of history. The UK signed the WA less than six months ago, as an international treaty. It was signed by Boris Johnson, following his much-trumpeted re-negotiation, and was put to the electorate as the ‘oven ready deal’ which was the centre piece of his re-election. At that election, the Brexit Party initially threatened to run a candidate in every seat if Johnson didn’t scrap the WA but [then withdrew that demand](#) and [did not field candidates in Tory-held seats](#). John Longworth, then a Brexit Party MEP (he was later expelled from it), [welcomed this change of strategy \(£\)](#) on the grounds that “the Government’s exit agreement is Brexit and, whilst it has drawbacks, could result in a good deal”. No talk of a “poison pill” then. The Brexit Party itself garnered 2% of the vote and did not win any seats.

Thereafter, the WA Act was passed by a large majority in the House of Commons with support from ERG MPs, including Paterson. Did they not want the British Parliament to make its own decisions? It may be that some MPs did not read or understand it: if so, tough. They should have done their job properly. It may be that they believed it was all up for re-negotiation in the future: if so, tough. They were wrong. As for Longworth, as a, by then, Conservative MEP he also voted (in the European Parliament) for the WA and [at the time said](#) that as a result we will leave the EU and “become once again an independent, sovereign nation”. [Now he says](#) it was drawn up by “fools or knaves” and is incompatible with being “a truly sovereign nation”.

The proposition that Johnson had no time to re-negotiate properly is nonsense both because the time frames were of his choice and because he himself declared it to be “a great new deal” and the [Conservative Party manifesto](#) for the 2019 election also described it as such. The [Conservative Party website explicitly said](#) that those who criticized it (in context, this presumably meant Farage) were wrong and that the deal did indeed “take back control”. And even – to be far more charitable than is warranted – if none of that were true, it’s simply absurd to think that any country can conduct itself in such a manner as to rip up major international agreements within months of signing them because it hadn’t created an adequate process to consider the commitments it was making.

The Ultras have never accepted the WA

The roots of this latest outburst from the Brexit Ultras go deep, as regular readers of this blog will know. Immediately [after the 2019 election I wrote](#):

“I suspect that many in the ERG will now be thinking that Johnson’s deal was only the bastard offspring of May’s ill-fated premiership and the ‘remainer parliament’, and feel no allegiance to it. They kept quiet during the election campaign, which required them to pledge support for Johnson’s deal, but that won’t necessarily last. For one thing, many of them are rebels by temperament, with a track record going back in some cases to John Major’s premiership, and

ruthlessly indifferent to party loyalty or discipline With all that said, in the aftermath of his fresh election victory and on a scale that was so unexpected, it is far more likely that the ERG will keep their powder dry. But all that means is that even as Brexit 'gets done' they will hold on to the belief that the WA meant that 'this was not really Brexit' and will be watching keenly – in both senses of the word – for further 'betrayals'."

That suspicion has now proved correct – though how much overt support the current campaign against the WA will have amongst Tory MPs remains to be seen. It might be tempting to dismiss the CBP Report as the work of a fringe minority group of cranks. But that would be a very serious mistake. Over and over again, this group or one of its other incarnations has quickly seen its initially outlandish positions become mainstream, aided by the way that, [as new research shows \(figure 2\)](#), MPs affiliated with groups like the ERG and Leave means Leave (co-founded by John Longworth) get disproportionate media attention. The concerted way in which they are pushing this new message leads me to think it could rapidly gain traction.

Indeed, as I suggested [in a more recent post](#), there have already been ominous signs that the government – and, implicitly, Dominic Cummings – [regard the WA as 'defective'](#), with the potential to lead Britain down the path to international pariahdom. I thought then, and still think, that even this government would not renege on an international treaty at least unless no trade deal is reached in which case the pressure to do so will intensify perhaps to irresistibility. The proposition in the CBP report, of course, is that whether or not there is a deal the WA should be ditched.

It is, frankly, an insane idea – politically, legally and diplomatically - but it grows from the long-evident way that the Ultras are never satisfied with Brexit, however hard and in whatever form. This is partly because the ideas they have of what is possible are total fantasy, and so as soon as they encounter reality, as they did in the Article 50 negotiations, they are doomed to be 'betrayed'. But the deeper issue is that there is, actually, a *desire* to be betrayed, a desire always to be campaigning for something even more extreme, always to be insisting that Brexit is being denied them. In the most recent example, as in the past, this extends to denouncing as betrayal even things that they *themselves* have supported or voted for in the past. It is a pathology which has totally deformed British politics so that, now, at the moment of their victory, they are still complaining, still unhappy, still spitting out vitriol, still blaming remainers.

The prospect of endless Brexit battles

Clearly, there are significant and dangerous connections between these demands to scrap the WA and what is emerging about the effects of Brexit. For as these effects unfold the Ultras will never admit that all (or anything) that they were warned of was true. Instead, they will insist that the effects are the consequence of Brexit not having been done properly. In this way, they keep their dream and their pathological victimhood intact, whilst blaming remainers for the effects of the policy they themselves advocated. It is a form of politics that is deeply immature but, worse, totally destructive, endlessly revisiting the same battlefields until there is nothing left but dirt and ashes.

Its consequence is likely to be that even as we all suffer the many adverse consequences of the Brexit they forced on us with lies and fantasies we do not even get the consolation prize of an end to their complaints, their taunts, and their vicious slurs. Any kind of hope – as proposed [in my recent post](#) – of initiating a new post-Brexit conversation with and about Europe is dashed as

a result. Any idea of healing domestic divisions is destroyed, because these Ultras do not want to heal divisions: they thrive upon them. So we get Brexit and we also get endless screeches of Brexit betrayed. They now call the WA a “poison pill” but it is their own poison, one which has now infected the entire body politic.

There’s still the slimmest of chances of an antidote – but unfortunately it rests almost entirely with Boris Johnson, though others may have some influence. Perhaps it could be possible to finally say to these Ultra Brexiters than enough is enough. It is simply insane for a country to keep putting itself through – or being put through – this torture. We’ve had years of it, and the Brexiters have got their Brexit. Every possible thing to accommodate them has been done. We can’t just go on and on revisiting it, lurching endlessly from one crisis to another in order to satisfy the whims of a tiny minority of politicians and commentators. We can’t poison every domestic and international well with their needs, their priorities, their insatiable obsessions.

In his article, John Longworth writes that “the battle to leave the EU is coming to an end. The battle for Britain is just beginning”, and invites Johnson to be (of course) a Churchill not a Halifax. But Britain is being destroyed by this endless desire of the Brexit Ultras to engage in battles. If we really must use these constant war analogies, with Brexit having happened, what we need from Johnson is an Attlee-like rebuilding of a battered, broken, and nearly broke country. It’s unlikely it is in his range, but if he can’t find it, and won’t go, then I fear that Longworth and his ilk will drag us all yet again into a pointless, debilitating, destructive conflict.

If so, there will be no victors, just as there have been none from Brexit. For the most remarkable and the most tragic thing about Brexit is how rare it now is to hear anyone – and certainly the Brexit Ultras - speak of it as something that gives them any pleasure.

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