

## And now, the end is near....

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No prizes for guessing that the title of this blog is the first line of 'My Way', the 1969 single by Frank Sinatra. 'My Way', though vaguely elegiac in reflecting on life, is ultimately anthemic in its defiance that whatever the mistakes, the singer did it their way without concern or regard for the consequences.

Should Prime Minister Boris Johnson reflect on his career so far, he'd certainly be able to state that he's done things his way and, has been strenuously argued by his many critics, with little or no regard to the impact on others. It's impossible to say what Johnson's 'way' is. Johnson is someone whose stance alters depending on whoever is influencing him and, more particularly, what he thinks is to his personal advantage.

Johnson's desire to appease the notorious ERG (European Research Group) has effectively 'painted him into a corner' on negotiations on the FTA (Free Trade Agreement). Despite Johnson's predecessor Theresa May, [saying that no-deal being better than a "bad" one](#), she became aware that the former would result in WTO (World Trade Organisation) tariffs of up to 35% remains on a range of goods. However, despite surely being aware that the many of the household items we use are imported from the EU remains ebullient at prospect.

During his campaign to become PM, [Johnson stated the chances of no-deal being a "million to one"](#). Ever the opportunist, Johnson had only been able to achieve the deal he was touting – in fact the Withdrawal Agreement which is not the FTA – following discussions with Irish *Taoiseach* (leader), Leo Varadkar, by agreeing to something he'd previously categorically stated would never happen; an effective border in the Irish Sea for goods crossing to Northern Ireland from Great Britain that may cross the border into the Republic.

This was necessary to maintain the principles of the Good Friday Agreement that has ensured – a sometimes fragile – peace for over

20 years. The Internal Market Bill (IMB), an international agreement made with the EU, showed that if it suits Johnson's purposes, he is perfectly prepared to undermine what he already agreed to. Fintan O'Toole in his [Guardian article in early September](#), 'Boris Johnson's 'oven-ready' Brexit had a secret footnote: we'll rehash it later' makes clear his contempt for a man word and 'honour' has little value.

So, four years and four months after the result of the referendum on continued membership of the EU and with just over two months to go before the end of 'transition' (a deadline that was set after triggering Article 50 in March 2017), there is still no clarity as to what arrangements will prevail between the UK and EU from 1<sup>st</sup> January. In a world of deadlines it is worth noting that the EU fixed a deadline of 30<sup>th</sup> September to scrap the IMB – which is now law – and Johnson stated that if no FTA was achieved by 15<sup>th</sup> October it would be necessary for both sides to "accept that and move on".

The fact that there are still ongoing discussions is, perhaps, unsurprising. In such negotiations nothing is over until it is over. However, whatever happens in the next couple of weeks will surely start to put in place the certainty that everyone, particularly those in business, believe is essential. Even if this were to be no-deal, at least we'll know though, as [The Guardian](#) speculate reported, Johnson wants to wait for outcome of the US election before making any decision.

What is increasingly clear is that if there is a deal it will be extremely 'thin' and much 'harder' than that envisaged by Theresa May when she was PM. Critically, as commentators of all shades are stressing, there will be disruption and increased costs are inevitable.

Though Covid-19 dominates the news, some attention is being given to what the end of transition will mean and what'd likely to occur. Conservative supporting [Telegraph](#) examined possible "turmoil" that may be suffered by supermarkets from any deal at this stage. Given that 30% of food in the UK is imported from the EU, any disruption caused by arrangements that are not clear as well as lack of continuance of zero tariffs would, could lead to shortages and higher prices.

In the current climate in which there will be a vast increase in joblessness in many communities caused by the impact of restrictions because of the need to reduce infections due to Covid-19, this would add to the stresses being experienced by families whose income is diminished.

The *Telegraph* article also described the reliance many sectors, most especially food manufacture, have on migrant EU labour in recent years. The absence of such workers, it's stated, may mean firms having to pay more to attract workers. As a result, causing "some businesses to rethink their models".

[Kate Holton of Reuters](#) considers concerns of hauliers. Tony Shally, managing director of freight specialist Espace Europe is quoted and believes there'll be "carnage" and, whatever happens, there will be a need to engage in "fire-fighting" from the 1st of January.

A 'war of words' between government and road hauliers gives little confidence of avoiding any chaos. Theodore Agnew, a minister working on preparations for Brexit at the Treasury and Cabinet Office, claiming that haulier business should be "more energetic" in preparing for the end of transition was greeted with exasperation and anger. Despite being provided with a [271-page Border Operating Model](#) by government, hauliers have no certainty of what conditions they're supposed to prepare for and accused him of taking a "head in the sand approach".

Northern Ireland, given it's the only part of the UK with a land border to the EU, was always going to be a peculiarity. Insufficient attention was dedicated to the issue of Northern Ireland during the referendum campaign. As Theresa May will attest and perhaps write about in any autobiography she eventually publishes, Northern Ireland – the notorious 'backstop' in particular – defined her period as PM and ultimately ended it.

The reality of the end of transition, regardless of any deal, 'thin' or otherwise, is examined by Sam McBride in the Belfast [Newsletter](#). McBride makes clear that there would be severe interruption of the patterns of trade and costs incurred all involved in the supply-chain which will be passed onto customers. Similar to other commentators who fear what may happen after 31<sup>st</sup> December, McBride is concerned

that increased bureaucracy will undermine the ability of many within Northern Ireland's supply-chain in every sector, including food, to compete.

Worryingly, in a part of the UK in which inequality and deprivation is endemic, McBride quotes business experts who believe impositions and added costs may result in some firms not continuing to operate in Northern Ireland. Aodhán Connolly of the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium, representing major supermarkets and other retailers, is concerned by the prospect of “thousands of pounds being added to the cost of every load coming across the Irish Sea to fill supermarket shelves” leading either to price increases or some businesses deciding to cease operating.

McBride's neatly sums up the situation everyone, in Northern Ireland , and the UK in general, have reached; “Until now, Brexit has for most people been fairly intangible, but the reality will become increasingly clear over coming weeks.” One of the outcomes of Brexit, he believes, is ironically the fact that the a party which campaigned to leave (and against the GFA), the DUP, will have been instrumental in making the break-up of the union with Northern Ireland more likely.

Whatever happens there are going to be profound consequences for all of us. Indeed, McBride speculates on who will be blamed?

Time will, of course, provide answers.

In the meantime, the continuing choreography of Brexit is likely to result in a thin deal requiring concessions on both sides. Ott and Ghauri writing in [The Conversation](#) believe achieving a deal is essential. Seminal commentator [Anton Spisak](#) considers this outcome is indeed possible but will require compromise from both the UK and EU. That said, he contends, a danger lies in the “political cost of a grand bargain” being too high for both sides.

[Independent journalist Sean O'Grady](#), thinks Johnson will “cave over Brexit in the next few weeks” whilst selling as his original plan”. Any deal, O'Grady believes, though “flimsy” and “dictated by Brussels from a position of extraordinary British weakness” will be inferior to the terms we used to enjoy and “cost jobs and living standards.”

Johnson, though, will proclaim such a deal to “a weary, distracted, fearful British populace” and expect praise and gratitude for achieving outcomes that so undermines the interests of the vast majority.

Whether Johnson will have any regrets or believes he bit off more than he could chew, we can only guess for now. Nonetheless, as Sinatra crooned in a song he eventually came to detest, Johnson will have achieved Brexit his way.

**Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Brexit and Northern Ireland, Bordering on Confusion* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13:978-1694447807) and *English Regions After Brexit: Examining Potential Change through Devolved Power* (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8666953099). He has contributed chapters to a number of texts in the last year (in 2020 unless otherwise stated): *Brexit Negotiations after Article 50: Assessing Process, Progress and Impact* (published in 2019 by Emerald Publishing, ISBN: 978-1787697683); *The Wolves in the Forest: Tackling Inequality in the 21st Century* edited by Hindley and Hishman (published in 2019 by Social Liberal Forum); *Boris, Brexit and the Media* edited by Mair, Clark, Fowler, Snoddy and Tait (published by Abramis Academic Publishing, ISBN-13: 978-1845497644); *The Virus and the Media: How British Journalists Covered the Pandemic*, edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8643725824); *The Pandemic, Where Did We Go Wrong?* edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books, ISBN-13: 979-8665858326); *BBC, A Winter of Discontent?* edited by Mair (published by Bite-Sized Books ISBN-13: 979-8694863117). His latest chapter, ‘Did ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ Result in the Country ‘Getting Stuffed’?’ will be included in *The Pandemic, Where are We Still Going Wrong?* which is due to be published in November.**