

Who is to Blame?

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies

Predictably enough, EU leaders reacted last night with some dismay to Theresa May's inability to articulate any alternatives if her "Plan A" were to be voted down by Parliament yet again next week.

Taking matters into their own hands, May has been offered a new "Brexit Day" of April 12th should Parliament reject the Withdrawal Agreement again and fail to come up with a coherent alternative. French President Emmanuel Macron summed up these sentiments by stating: "No extension either if there is not a clear majority to give a mandate on the future relationship," [\[1\]](#)

In this context, the PM's speech on Wednesday night – in effect blaming Parliament for her inability to secure passage of the withdrawal agreement negotiated with the EU – was extraordinary in the naked claim to represent the "will of the people" against the frustrating antics of Parliament in "delivering Brexit".

Much has been said already that these remarks are divisive and dangerous, given that a number of MPs have already faced death threats and in the 2016 referendum campaign, MP Jo Cox was murdered. In this regard, I concur with this view, but the notion of "blame" is worth exploring further.

Perhaps the PM could start by looking at members (and ex-members) of her own cabinet. Secretary for Trade (and prominent Brexiteer) Dr Liam Fox promised that the UK would be able to replicate all 40+ of the EU's trade deals by 29th March. However, of these a mere 7 have been agreed [\[2\]](#), of which one (the Palestinian Authority) is not even a state, being effectively dependent on another (Israel).



Other economic titans with which the UK has agreed to replicate EU trade agreements include Pacific Islands such as Fiji and the Faroe Islands. Awkwardly, Turkey and Japan (clearly minor states in comparison) are conspicuous by their absence^[3].

Whilst keen to sever links with the EU, Fox has had little to show for all the air miles he has clocked up in his role. This, of course, is in addition to the trade deal we were going to do with the EU itself – with which we do around half of our total trade – proclaimed by Fox as being “*the easiest in history*”^[4]. Yet we haven’t even *begun* these discussions.

Trump’s America appears another challenging target. For all the bluster, work has barely begun on any trade deal. Indeed, given the lack of appetite (if you’ll pardon the pun) for US food standards amongst the British public, I think we can safely rule that one out until after privatisation of the NHS. Perhaps you see the pigs flying already.

Or consider another prominent Brexiteer, and now Environment secretary Michael Gove. In light of the current parliamentary deadlock, it seems preposterous that just weeks before the EU Referendum Gove stated that “*we hold all the cards and we can choose the path we want*”^[5].

Or consider David Davis, one time Secretary of State for Exiting the EU, who stated that: “*Within 2 years, before negotiation with the EU is likely to be complete, and therefore before anything material has*

changed, we can negotiate a free trade area massively larger than the EU.”[\[6\]](#)

Or we could consider Boris Johnson’s endless bluster of the virtues of leaving with a “no deal” and reverting to WTO third country status. For all the bluster over WTO rules, the reality is that the WTO covers only the absolute minimum required for effective trade. All of the non-tariff barriers that have been abolished by the EU come on top of this.

Trade agreements with Commonwealth countries will prove elusive and not make up for losing ready access to our biggest market. It is perhaps this that prompted former Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, to state that notions that the Commonwealth could substitute for current membership of the EU were “bollocks”.

Going outside of Parliament, Nigel Farage (remember him?) is currently “leading” a Leave means Leave march from Sunderland to London. That supporters of this march have to pay £50 to take part speaks volumes, as does the Great Leader’s reluctance to commit himself to walking the whole route.

That only 100 diehards turned up to take part in the opening stage of this march makes Farage’s claims to voice the “will of the people” look rather hollow in current circumstances. In contrast, a petition to revoke Article 50 has already garnered well over 2 million signatures.

In seeking to apportion blame then, as Donald Tusk correctly identified, one would be best to look at the individuals mentioned above, who set the country down a path of trying to meet unrealistic expectations of having one’s cake and eating it too.

In this context, May should only be seen as the hapless caretaker, who has prioritised keeping her party together over trying to build a genuine consensus around alternative Brexit options for the good of the country, and has gambled its future on a high-stakes game of chicken with Parliament.

As it is, Parliament is likely to reject May’s agreement yet again (if it gets to another vote) and she will be forced to seek a longer extension to Article 50 (probably to the end of the year) and the UK would then take part in EU parliamentary elections.

To reiterate, EU leaders have made clear that they will only entertain this if there is a clear change of Brexit direction by the UK – for example, another referendum, or a general election.

This is all a far cry from the quick and clean exit from the EU that was promised in 2016 by the aforementioned individuals. In conclusion, the practical difficulties exposed by Brexit have laid bare the rosy claims made by Brexiteers in the lead-up to the 2016 referendum.

I leave this post with a quote of dialogue from Juncker and Tusk reported in today's Guardian:

"In the closing press conference, Tusk, was asked whether, if MPs refused to vote for that deal, would more room be made in hell – a reference to his earlier remark about where those people who promoted Brexit "without a sketch of a plan" would go.

[Tusk replied] *"According to our pope, hell is still empty and it means there are a lot of spaces."*

Juncker added: "Don't go to hell."[\[7\]](#)

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/mar/21/no-deal-brexit-emmanuel-macron-theresa-may-mps>

[2] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-47213842>

[3] <https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-02-21/HCWS1352/>

[4] <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-40667879/eu-trade-deal-easiest-in-human-history>

[5] https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/michael-gove/michael-gove-vote-leave_b_9728548.html

[6] <https://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2016/07/david-davis-trade-deals-tax-cuts-and-taking-time-before-triggering-article-50-a-brexit-economic-strategy-for-britain.html>

[7] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/mar/22/it-was-not-clear-if-she-had-a-plan-at-all-how-mays-night-at-the-summit-unfolded>