

# There'll be queuing over the White Cliffs of Dover...

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Trials of how well the A526 copes with lorry traffic from Manston Airport (now disused) began today, bringing home to many that a no-deal Brexit in less than 3 months is now a real prospect. This coincides with a letter from over 200MPs, petitioning the Prime Minister to explicitly rule out leaving the EU without a Withdrawal Agreement in place[1]. Coincidentally, it has been suggested in the media that the date for Parliament to vote on the government's intended Withdrawal Agreement is now tentatively scheduled for 15th January[2].

Of course, given that EU negotiators have ruled out renegotiating this proposed Withdrawal Agreement, the logical implication of this is that in the likely event of Parliament rejecting it, the Prime Minister would be committed to either holding a second referendum (which itself would entail negotiating several challenges) or unilaterally revoking Article 50 and remaining in the EU. By delaying the "meaningful vote" until the last possible minute, Theresa May appears to be playing a game of 'chicken' with Parliament. It will be interesting to see what the outcome of any dispute between the legislature and executive will be.

Operation Brock, as the plan to ease Dover-bound traffic is known, is a key pillar of the government's contingency planning for a no-deal exit of the EU. The plan to keep lorries at Manston is just a small part of this: much traffic will continue to use the M20, with the southbound carriageway converted into what would essentially amount to a lorry queue (keeping the middle lane free for emergency vehicles)[3]. The intention is to ensure that HGV movement is continuous (if very slow). Meanwhile, the northbound carriageway of the motorway would be converted into a contra-flow system with 2 lanes for each direction[3]. This will apply between junctions 8 and 9, before Dover-bound lorries leave the M20 at junction 7 in order to wait at Manston Airport[3].

Of course, a trial with under 100 lorries is unlikely to fully mimic the strains of a port that handles 10,000 HGVs on a busy day. Nevertheless, the ability to cope with 100 vehicles during rush-hour is

important as it suggests that 2,000 HGVs could use the route daily without undue stress on the road network even at the busiest times. There is also the possibility that ports other than Dover could handle a portion of the port's traffic. Although plans to resurrect the port of Ramsgate are unlikely to be implemented by the end of March[4], there are proposals to use a number of other ports (notably Poole, Portsmouth and even Immingham).

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Ultimately, the UK retains significant control over the flow of goods into the country (as elucidated in a [blog](#) last week). Nevertheless, the challenge with cross-channel flows is the circular closed-loop nature of them: in other words, a delay in outbound traffic is likely to trigger a delay in inward-bound traffic. This is where the really serious threat to just-in-time production is likely to lie. Exports that are not time-critical can feasibly be rerouted through another port, although it is not clear that there will necessarily be the right economic incentives in place to do this.

In 2018, the port of Dover handled some 2.6m lorries – amounting to an average of around 7125 lorries per day. Although peak movements are significantly greater than this, it is likely that April movements could be rather lower both due to seasonal variation (economic activity and consumer spending in the first and second quarters is typically lower than in the run-up to Christmas) and planned shutdowns related to Brexit (for example the timing of MINI's shutdown). Pertinently, many of the most time-consuming checks of goods pertain to sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks. A no-deal Brexit would also mean the immediate imposition of substantial tariffs on many agricultural exports from the UK to the rest of the EU.

This is likely to result in a substantial reduction in exports of such goods to the EU. Whilst the decimation of part of the Britain's agricultural sector might be unwelcome, it would reduce some time-critical delays at the port of Dover. Moreover, the UK imports significantly more goods from the EU than it exports, suggesting that at least some lorries must be returning across the Channel either empty or with small loads, reducing at least some of the checks that are needed at Calais relative to Dover.

Most crucial of all, however, even in the event of a no-deal withdrawal from the EU, the UK and the EU (alongside France and other partners) should take immediate steps to try and reduce the economic damage caused. This should include unilateral measures, but there is also an urgent need to negotiate and conclude mutual recognition of a number of standards (alongside appropriate safeguards should those standards diverge). This should be feasible given that the UK and EU will have identical standards across a wide range of industries on exit-day. Finally, both the government and companies at large must begin stepping up preparations urgently so that they can navigate both the initial difficulties that might emerge but also improve the situation over time.

1. Sky News. More than 200 MPs want PM to rule out no-deal Brexit. 2019; Available from: <https://news.sky.com/story/more-than-200-mps-want-pm-to-rule-out-no-deal-brex-it-11600823>.

2. BBC. Brexit: Date for vote on Theresa May's deal confirmed. 2019; Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-46777987>.

3. Whiteman, A., 'Operation Brock' plans to keep freight moving at Dover if there is no Brexit deal, in The Loadstar. 2018, The Loadstar Media Ltd.: London.

4. BBC. Ramsgate 'can not be ready' for Brexit ferries. 2019; Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-46774054>.