

The Brexit Trick

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This will not take long. I am able to give this guarantee because I am writing about the British Government's "Plans". This is a subject matter that is almost bereft of content: in all essential substantive particulars, Conservative Planning is a nullity.

On Monday, 20th March, on a visit to Wales Theresa May informed an expectant British public that "We have a Plan for Britain". Since then keyboards have melted and forests have died in the search for the specific, real terms of this "Plan". Nobody has found it, or uncovered any content at all. Nothing has "leaked" into the public domain either; typically a sign that there is nothing there to leak (for all Government is deliberately constructed as a sieve).

We have already been given a 'dry-run' of Conservative planning capacities, from the immediate aftermath of the Brexit vote; when the Brutus and Cassius of Conservative Leave, Michael Gove and Boris Johnson, faced with the prospect of leading the Referendum victors, and presenting Britain with the substance of their vision, their "Plan": immediately and abjectly fled the field. The Conservative Party, subject to its own long history of bad judgements about people; immediately appointed Theresa May Prime Minister, in order to put the Conservative Party firmly ahead of the National Interest, and lead us into this risible Coalition of Chaos. Since Theresa May's disastrous appointment to an office she does not have the capacities to fill, what passes for the actual management of Brexit in the Conservative Government effectively handed the problematic functional process to David Davies and – far more importantly – the Whitehall Civil Service.

There rests an even more intractable problem for Britain than the crude, maladroitness of Conservatism. The Civil Service does not possess the resources, the capacities, the knowledge or the experience to negotiate the Brexit process; of course nobody can admit this, but there it is. The Civil Service does not possess these resources now; nor does the Civil Service have the capacity, or the time, to repair the abyss between where they are now, and where they need to be. Currently the Civil Service are hiring people by the hundred to close an impossible gap; but not from a pool of applicants that already have the professional expertise or the accumulated detailed experience required to cope with the scale of the operation. This kind of international knowledge, the deep, longstanding culture and skilled resources required to consider undertaking such a process and expect viable outcomes, can only be found in very few, very large civil international operations. On the scale required for Brexit, and across so many complex areas, these skills are typically to be found only in the US or EU. The EU has been negotiating on Britain's behalf in international trade for forty years. The EU therefore possesses not just all the EU's knowledge, but effectively, ours. In this specific world they know more about us than we do. The EU, and the EU alone already has all the necessary expertise and resources because that is what it is designed to do; for us. It follows that it possesses the culture and the knowledge we need:

and we do not.

Deep down the meaning of “no deal is better than a bad deal” reflects more critically than ‘choice’ or (laughably) Britain’s ‘freedom’, the fact that Britain has entered a world in which it is “over its head” and far out of its depth. “No deal”, cruelly but realistically, represents an important indication not of our negotiating ‘stance’, but of our real capacity to do any deal in the time, and on the scale required.

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More important than “no deal is better than a bad deal”, as a measure of Britain’s idea of a “Plan” is Theresa May’s other great contribution to the lexicon of the utterly meaningless: “Make no mistake, the central challenge we face is negotiating the best deal for Britain in Europe.” (19th May). The words “the best deal for Britain” have been repeated more often by Conservative politicians than any other statement on Brexit. The Conservatives have already turned it into a form of devout conviction. Let the buyer beware. What does it mean? Nobody knows. Nobody knows because nobody knows what is in the “Plan”. The Conservative solution to the ensuing problem; how do you persuade a gradually more anxious and suspicious electorate that they do not need to know the “Plan” to believe in the “best deal”; but can trust in the Conservatives to deliver it? Tell them that the Plan is a secret because we cannot give away our ‘negotiating hand’ to the “other side”: the EU. This is what we are asked to believe. It misrepresents the nature of these negotiations and the priorities of the EU, but that line of argument – after all – was always a ‘red herring’.

The Conservative insistence in telling the British people nothing about the British negotiating position is not based on wise negotiating strategy, but is rather a simple function of the chaos at the heart of Conservatism. The Conservatives do not understand enough about the complexities and consequences of adopting any final position on anything specific at all in the negotiations for reasons of simple ignorance of the facts, because in twelve months they have still learned virtually nothing. The Conservatives are terrified of discovering, soon after negotiating any specific issue, that they may have alighted on a ‘hostage to fortune’ (their whole 2017 election strategy is a recent example of this outcome). The “best deal for Britain” is not a secret because of what the EU would then know, but has a much simpler purpose. The “best deal” is a secret because the British Government requires to keep it a secret from the British people, not the EU; revealing the (largely illusory) “Plan” to the British people is not an option for a Conservative Government and Party intent on remaining in power, no matter what.

Neither Theresa May nor the Conservative Party can afford to negotiate any deal at all in the EU, and return to the British people with a negotiated settlement of any kind that is not the “best deal”. Which means a deal that nobody in Britain could then unpick, undermine or politically exploit (from any or all sides). How do you achieve this? By defining whatever deal the Conservative Government negotiates as the “best deal”; and then using the Party, the resources of its donors, and its obedient media and press to sell the deal negotiated as the “best deal”, in a total propaganda tsunami. This can only be done if the Government refuses

to tell the public anything at all about its “Plan” beforehand, or the content of the best deal. The Conservatives have no idea what the “best deal” will look like; because the ‘best deal’ has to be whatever they say it is, and whatever they have chosen, or are able to negotiate. Think about it.

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