

For UK Politics, Brexit Is Set to Be a Slow Grind of Contradictions

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On Monday 5 September, over two months since Britain voted to leave the European Union, the new Brexit minister David Davis stood up to address Parliament on the government's plan for the upcoming negotiations. Many of us who voted Remain were curious to see exactly what sort of consensus had been reached within the cabinet on the deal the UK would be seeking with its EU partners. True to the form of the referendum campaign, however, we were roundly disappointed: Davis' speech consisted entirely of generalities, obfuscation and evasion of difficult questions. As Labour MP and ardent Remainer Chuka Umunna noted afterwards, 'nobody is any clearer on what Brexit actually means.'

As unpalatable as it might be, there is a simple reason for this – there is no consensus in the government, let alone in the wider country, as to what form Brexit should take. All that was agreed at the ballot box in June was that Britain should leave the EU. Not only was the result marginal (52% on a turnout of 72%, approximately 37% of the adult population) but the Leave campaign offered no clear roadmap for what would happen in the event of a UK departure from the Union. There are now a plethora of options on the table for the British government, none of which are without serious political or economic cost.

The key decision is whether or not Britain will seek to remain in the single market, which is a carefully chosen euphemism to avoid outlining what this option would really mean: joining Norway, Iceland and Lichtenstein in the European Economic Area, acquiescing to the bulk of EU law without a formal role in the supranational legislative process, continuing to contribute to the Union budget, and accepting the four freedoms of capital, labour, goods and services. For those Remainers who have not yet given up the fight, this is now the battleground. The official Remain campaign, Britain Stronger in Europe, has in the last weeks reconstituted itself as [Open Britain](#) to agitate for the closest possible future relationship between the UK and the EU.

Even those of us sympathetic to the EEA option have to admit this is a pretty poor alternative, retaining most of what we currently have at the expense of most of our influence in Brussels. It is unsurprising, then, that this option is anathema to most Leavers, both those who want to retain tariff-free trade with the EU and others who want to relaunch Britain as a global mercantile capital. The problem is, as the Remain campaign was all too timid in pointing out in the lead up to the vote, the UK accepts either all four freedoms of the EU or none of them. There is absolutely no appetite or incentive for other Member States to concede ground here, fudging a deal that allows Britain to renege on free movement of labour simply because it kicked up enough dust. The Leavers are blind if they think we can continue trading in complex financial instruments whilst not accepting Polish factory workers here as well.

Naturally, cutting itself out of the world's largest economic bloc would be a monumentally idiotic course of action for the UK to take. Nevertheless (and with too little data to support this claim) the prospect of reducing immigration seems to be the main reason that Brits voted to leave the EU. With a new government composed of both Remainers and Leavers, the contradiction between these two positions will continue to grind on. There is no magic trick that will keep everyone onside, which is why Davis and other ministers have thus far assiduously avoided committing themselves to a concrete plan.

One wonders how long this can continue. As some of us warned when David Cameron launched his ‘renegotiation’ strategy, and again at the outset of the referendum campaign, a vote does not itself solve the problem. The questions in hand penetrate far too deeply into British society and European geopolitics to be decided by a simplistic in-out ballot. We are now reaping the reward for decades of politicians on all sides using ‘Europe’ as a convenient get-out clause when faced with any significant or unpopular choice. Politics is a zero-sum game: sooner or later a decision will have to be made, and that decision will inevitably upset some people.

Of course, even if it did not pose the same immediate strife, a narrow Remain victory would have failed to resolve the problem too. Reflecting since the referendum on how things might have gone differently, I have kept coming back to the same view. It is not enough for a country to simply be part of the EU. The European project is a living organism, one that needs constant attention and cultivation if it is to prosper and retain people’s support. There is greater recognition of this in mainland Europe, but the British referendum came at the end of three decades’ worth of slow-drip, lazy, populist Euroscepticism in both the media and politics, of which UKIP and the more jingoistic newspapers were but one part. Only a long-term, concerted effort against misinformation and advocating for the benefits and ideals of the EU could have delivered a convincing win for Remain and spared us the ongoing tussle.

Let the British predicament be a cautionary tale for other countries facing similar problems. Whilst our neighbours are learning from our mistakes, we will be locked in the same slow grind of contradictions as we try to make sense of our future.