

Enough magical thinking. The silly season must stop here



*Britain has only a couple of months left to decide on its future relationship with the EU. **Phil Syrpis (University of Bristol)** says it is time for both the government and the opposition to level with the public about the choices involved. The coarse sloganeering of the past two years will lead to a destructive Brexit unless politicians get real.*

The summer recess is often described as silly season. But this year is different: the silliness has to stop. We have just two months to decide on our future relationship with the EU, and the magical thinking – in the government and Labour party alike – is no longer sustainable.

The basics are these: at the end of March 2019, the Article 50 clock will stop ticking. In order to allow for scrutiny, implementation and ratification in both the UK and the EU-27, the withdrawal agreement – and the framework for a future relationship deal – must be signed in October, which is less than three months away.



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Given that the UK has chosen to leave the EU, it could a) seek to join the EEA (the Norway model); b) choose to leave the single market and seek a free trade agreement with the EU (the Canada model); or c) choose to leave the single market without a deal. These options are, in principle, still available. But they all have costs. The EU has, with varying degrees of patience, been saying it is for the UK to make its choices, and it has formed its proposals in the light of the UK's 'red lines'.

The problem, of course, is that the UK has not (yet?) made the necessary choices. The government has told us that Brexit means Brexit. That it means taking control of our money, our borders, and our laws. That – and here I paraphrase – it means keeping the benefits of EU membership, without paying for it, or, more importantly, agreeing to abide by EU law standards. Neither the government nor the Labour party has been able to articulate a coherent position.

A lot of time has been spent desperately trying to unearth a magical solution which finesses the stark nature of the choices ahead. There have been calls for imagination and creativity. The rather messy and incoherent relationships which the EU has with some of its neighbours, Turkey, Ukraine and Switzerland, have been studied closely. Ultimately, in July, the Government alighted on the Chequers plan (which promptly cost it David Davis and Boris Johnson). In the weeks until October, it is not suddenly going to find 'the' answer.

In the short term, the withdrawal agreement is key. That, of course, relies on there being an answer to [the Irish border conundrum](#). The UK and the EU have committed to avoiding a hard border in Ireland, respecting the Good Friday Agreement. But, if the UK leaves the EU, the fact is that EU's external border will fall across the island of Ireland. There will be a hard border even if Northern Ireland (or the UK as a whole) has a comprehensive trade agreement with the EU, and even if Northern Ireland (or the UK as a whole) remains part of the customs union. The only way to avoid a hard border is for Northern Ireland (or the UK as a whole) to be part of both the customs union and, for goods at least, the single market. That entails alignment with EU standards, and a key role for the institutions which monitor and enforce those standards. And it entails a commitment to continue to align with those standards. That does not sit comfortably with the more buccaneering visions of Brexit.

In the face of the very real risk of no-deal chaos, both the UK and the EU have been trying to finesse, or de-dramatise, the Irish border issue. The longevity of the backstop solution, its geographical scope (NI or UK), and its material scope have all been probed. It is not impossible that a messy and incoherent solution, which strains the integrity of either the UK, or the internal market (or more likely both) and which is difficult to monitor and enforce, may be attainable. That would pave the way for the standstill transition. It would – and this is extraordinary – widely be hailed as triumphant progress.

This is a time for serious thinking. The most important question is this: what sort of relationship should the UK have with the EU in the years ahead? The fundamental choice is whether we want to continue to enjoy, to borrow a phrase, a deep and special relationship with the EU, or whether we want to replace that with something much looser.

The Chequers plan is unworkable. More than that, I have failed to see any convincing articulation of the benefits of any particular form of Brexit. The aspiration is damage limitation. None of the Brexit options compares with the deal the UK currently has as a member of the EU. Each leaves the country economically worse off. 'Norway', the least economically damaging, is, in part, vulnerable to the 'vassal state' critique. 'Canada' would take years to negotiate and, in any case, would not prevent a hard border in Ireland. And even the government now seems to have realised that the chaotic consequences of no deal should not be seriously contemplated.

Over the summer, I hope that the key political players, in particular in government and the Labour party, but also those seeking to challenge the position of the leadership of the main parties, reflect on the fundamental question, articulate coherent positions, and explain those positions to the public.

It hardly needs saying that the decision is a huge one on which livelihoods depend. But there is something even greater at stake. Since the referendum, politics in the UK has coarsened. Laws have been broken, conventions casually set aside. Reasoned debate has been sidelined, with sloganeering populism taking centre stage. Shamefully, neither the government nor the opposition have levelled with the public about the nature of the choices ahead. Instead, they seem paralysed by the perceived need to implement 'the will of the people'.

If the silliness continues, the UK will blunder its way forwards towards a messy, destructive and unstable Brexit, which cannot deliver what was promised on its behalf. The clock is ticking relentlessly. It is time for the political class in the UK to think long and hard about the future, and to begin, albeit belatedly, to engage constructively with the public (and with the EU). The costs of a failure to do so are unimaginably high.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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