

Brexit has become unnegotiable. Theresa May has a constitutional duty to admit that truth



*The informal Salzburg summit has driven home the bitter truth behind the Brexit saga. It has become unnegotiable. Mrs May now has a constitutional duty to admit that truth. There is no positive outcome that is equally acceptable to the EU and to the UK, argues **Jolyon Howorth**.*

The British people, who voted in a narrow majority to leave the EU, were disinformed and misled in fundamentally devious ways by the Brexiters. President Macron stated this baldly and he is right. The Leavers had no idea what they were getting the country into and the overwhelming majority of voters would have been incapable of outlining how they saw things developing during and after the negotiations on exiting. They did not know the difference between a “hard” or a “soft” Brexit. They had no information about the relative merits and demerits of the “EEA model” as opposed to the “Canada model” or the “no deal model” or indeed any other exit model. In short, the electorate was sold a myth. They were sold that myth by a handful of ideologues and careerists who had no clearer idea than the voters themselves about what Brexit actually involved.

Theresa May’s apparent fixation on respecting the verdict of the electorate is therefore misguided, unnecessary and dangerous. It is dangerous because all of the serious studies about the impact on the UK of Brexit, including the government’s own [comprehensive study](#), make it quite clear that, under any scenario, the country will be worse off after the UK leaves than it was before. How could any prime minister accept such a stark outcome in the name of a badly flawed “democratic decision”? The “Chequers plan” is currently being spun even by some of the [most serious Brexit analysts](#) as having merit. That is only the case if one accepts that, in comparison with all the other “plans” proposed by the hard Brexiters, or with either the EEA model or the Canada model, it is, *for the UK*, almost by default, the least unacceptable of the lot. But that does not make it acceptable to the EU. It has been firmly rejected by the EU-27, as [Donald Tusk](#) said, because “it will not work”. If, as a plan for UK-EU relations going forward, it will not work for the EU, it will not work – full stop. Mrs May has argued that it is now up to the EU to propose its own plan. That is not the case. If the UK wishes to forge a new relationship with the EU, it is up to London to set out a plan that will work for both sides.



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Mrs May has no alternative now, if she is to be honest with herself (a Remainer) and with the British people (who were misinformed). As the country's leader and the person most invested in seeking a positive outcome, she must finally admit the truth in a full and frank address to the British people. Brexit was a mistake. There is no positive outcome that meets the red lines of the two parties. To her credit, she made an honest and valiant attempt to negotiate what finally transpired to be the unnegotiable. It is not her fault that she failed. The only sensible course, therefore, is to suspend Article 50 and request a return to the status-quo ante. Hard-line Brexiters will continue to fret and froth, but the vast majority of English citizens (and Brexit is overwhelmingly a problem for the English) will recognize that Brexit was, quite simply, a bad idea. They will then get on with their lives.

There could be one unanticipated positive outcome. The British people (and particularly the English), who have been in search of their identity since 1945, might finally recognize that it lies not in the distant past (Empire/Commonwealth), nor in the recent past ("special relationship" with the US) but in the future: the creation of a Europe whole, free and at peace. It is better that they draw this conclusion today rather than in 2040 after a period of harsh isolation in the middle of the North Sea. Mrs May has the political and constitutional responsibility to head off such an outcome by finally telling the truth.

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

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