

Brexit Armageddon

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

London, New Year's Eve 2018. It is a very English middle-class trait: the world will end if the price of a certain life style goes up. Certain services will be cut. Access to certain travel destinations might be restricted. (The usual European haunts in France and Spain rendered dearer if not inaccessible.) But there is no denying that the attitude to the New Year from this side of the world is one of gloom made normal.

Not a day goes by without a digest of panicked revelations about what will happen in the event of a “no-deal Brexit”. A lack of certainty has propelled a set of speculations so thick as to be asphyxiating. But there is always room for more, the next desperate act of a government so cadaverous it can only give vague clues that it is still alive, wincing, dodging and avoiding what faces the United Kingdom before the mandarins in Brussels and the nostalgia driven addicts in the Conservative Party.

London itself is the ground-zero of teeth-chattering panic. Stockpiling of essentials (and various non-essentials) is taking place in a manner reminiscent of the doom that might arise from nuclear holocaust or a crippling blockade initiated by a foreign power. These fears are not *entirely* irrational: no one knows what might happen to the smooth exchange of goods and services with the EU in the absence of any clear set of guidelines.

The latest manifestations of this sense of heightened neuroses can be found in three ferry contracts that have been awarded to French, British and Danish companies. But the means of shipping do not combat paperwork on the ground, the sort is bound to mount once Britain's departure from the EU bloc is enforced. Chief Executive of the UK Chamber of Shipping Bob Sanguinetti [puts it bluntly](#):

“Government is rightly preparing for every eventuality... but it is not clear that government-chartered ships can move goods faster or more efficiently than the private sector.”

The issue of customs remains an obstacle that threatens to hove into view with disrupting menace.

That said, the eve of 2019 featured a comic affair with a bitterly ironic dimension, an episode that rapidly came to be known in Twitterland as Ferrygate, more conventionally termed the Seaborne Freight controversy. It began with murmurs printed in the *Financial Times* from the May government that a no-deal Brexit could see the Dover corridor, comprising the port and tunnel, run at between 12-25 percent of normal capacity for half a year. Given that the proportion of trade being handled through the corridor comes to an eye-popping [52 percent](#) of value of the total trade in goods with the EU (some £422.6 billion), this is more than troubling.

This doomsday scenario was somewhat papered over by the farcical circumstances behind one of the ferry contracts - the British one no less - that was meant to be yet another emergency measure, part of a broader £107.7 million arrangement. The purpose of the contract will be to provide substitutable capacity to handle exiting volumes of trade that would have otherwise gone through the Dover corridor.

But the jokes piled on quickly: Seaborne Freight, having won a £13.8 million contract to operate ferries on a Ramsgate to Ostend route, had never previously operated ferries and had no intention of doing so till touching distance of the scheduled departure date from the EU.

“It has no ships and no trading history,” [observed](#) Paul Messenger, Conservative county councillor for Ramsgate, “so how can due diligence be done?”

The Department of Transport finds itself in a state of pulsating anxiety, churning out the paperwork of woe. The choice of words in its documents supplies more than a hint about what is coming, even if they genuinely cannot imagine what that might be. Such agreements are being put in place to counter “unforeseeable” situations, which is more than mildly absurd given that those situations are precisely that: unforeseeable.

The entire Brexit reaction has been characterised by a total absence of planning, which propels the circular reasoning that you cannot plan for what you simply do not know. This feeds the apocalyptic scenarios of empty supermarket shelves and absentee workers in industries characterised by the employ of vast numbers of EU citizens.

It has also bred a total mistrust. Plans circulate with a giddy confusion that show lack of consultation and engagement. Major motorworks, by way of example, have focused on the port of Dover. The plan (dare one use the word?) is to turn the M26 motorway into a holding area for hundreds of heavy vehicles to permit traffic greater freedom to move. In October, local MP Tom Tugendhat, Conservative chair of the foreign affairs committee, was seething in the House of Commons:

“It’s come to a pretty pass when [an MP] finds out that works have begun on a motorway to turn that motorway into a parking lot without consultation either with the local community or with surrounding [MPs].”

Fittingly absurd, though not as much as awarding a ferry contract to a company without ships.

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