

Soft Brexits and Hard Realities: The Tory Revolt

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [History](#)

It was meant to be an away day at Chequers in total hermetic isolation, an effort on the part of UK Prime Minister Theresa May to sketch some common ground in a cabinet that has struggled to agree on much regarding the imminent departure of Britain from the European Union. The clock is ticking, for many ominously, with the departure date slated for March 29, 2019.

The initial signs seemed good: a consensus had, initially, been reached by all brands of Brexiter. Chief Brexit minister David Davis and Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson had, in principle, come on board, though there were mutterings of dissatisfaction at the PM's new plan. At least for a time, collective cabinet responsibility had been satisfied.

The plan focused on, in the words of the [Chequers statement](#), a proposal establishing “a free trade area for goods. This would avoid friction at the border, protect jobs and livelihoods, and ensure both sides meet their commitment to Northern Ireland and Ireland through the overall future relationship.” Such a vision free of friction would entail maintaining “a common rulebook for all goods including agri-food” with a stress on harmonising UK laws with those of the EU. Parliament have the ultimate say on their passage. “Regulatory flexibility” would govern the issue of services; “strong reciprocal commitments related to open and free trade” would characterise UK-EU relations.

The issue of the role played by EU courts, always trouble for the fanatical leavers, would continue to play a part in so far as UK courts would heed “the common rulebook”. A joint institutional framework would ensure consistent interpretation and application of such rules, but “the supremacy of UK courts” would be assured.

As for the issue most worrying to the market types amongst the Tories, the proposal suggested “a new Facilitated Customs Arrangement that would remove the need for customs checks and controls between the UK and the EU as if a combined customs territory.” This would leave Britain to have its own seat at the World Trade Organisation and strike trade deals with other states, another cherry for the harsh Brexiter.

The populist element was also considered: free movement, a central EU principle, would end, but the UK would seek a principle of ensuring that UK and EU citizens would still be permitted to visit, work and live in respective jurisdictions with ease. Large annual payments to the EU, those so heavily stigmatised during the 2016 referendum campaign, would also end, though this would not terminate specific contributions to areas of “joint action”.

It did not take long for the ruptures within government ranks to begin. After the discomforting unity came the blood filled flood; first three resignations, all associated with the “hard” variety of Brexit lore. The most prominent of them was Davis himself who had

shown various, and variable colourings of competence during his time in that newly created position in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum. He had been marginalised of late, the Prime Minister evidently feeling that the issue was simply too important to leave to him. More to the point, he had threatened some five times to resign since November 2017, making him seem like a purveyor of empty threats.

With Davis' exit went deputy Steve Baker and junior Brexit minister Suella Braverman.

"The general direction of policy," came a liberated Davis [in his letter of resignation](#), "will leave us in at best a weak negotiating position, and possibly an inescapable one."

Parliamentary control, he opined, would be "illusory rather than real". The "common rule book" policy would effectively hand "control of large swathes of our economy to the EU and is certainly not returning control of our laws in any real sense."

On Monday, just minutes before May's address to members of parliament, Downing Street announced that Johnson was also making a dash for it. His [resignation letter](#) was certainly heavy with opportunistic John Bull flavour; Britain, he charged, risked heading "for the status of a colony".

The PM, he accused, was "sending our vanguard into battle with the white flags fluttering above them" in preparations for a "semi-Brexit". "It now seems that the opening bid of our negotiations involves accepting that we are not actually going to be able to make our own laws."

There is not much sincerity all around. Individuals like Environment Minister [Michael Gove](#) are backing May for the moment, thinking that a streak of sound pragmatism runs through this flawed plan. But anyone having Gove's backing is bound to feel the sheath of a blade, if not the blade itself, at some point.

Those remaining on May's rocked ship have become apocalyptic in a different way, suddenly seeing the EU as less problematic than their opponents opposite the Parliamentary chamber.

"If we don't pull together," went a Cabinet minister to The Guardian, "we risk the election of Jeremy Corbyn as prime minister."

Never mind Europe, went this particular line of reasoning: Labour might just walk in.

Within British politics, May's Friday product does not seem to be flying well, though it had taken off in a fashion. Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, taking the Scottish angle on this, [suggested](#) that the plan had started to unravel early, though it had a kernel of good sense.

"It simply underlines the fact that the UK is leaving the EU (which I wish it wasn't) the only workable solution is to stay in single market and customs union."

Then comes the most obvious point that would render this whole exercise drily spent and academic: Will the EU chief negotiator Michel Barnier and his crew have a bar of it? There is, superficially, too much of the Swiss solution to this, too much of the “give me your market” but spare me the regulatory trade-off. Having expressed his dislike for such a solution in the past, it is clear that May is facing the toughest of sells. The EU apparatchiks still wish to make an example of Britain, a form of deterrence against others who wish to take the exiting step in the name of reclaiming sovereignty.

But there is something striking about the latest chapter in the ever ballooning Brexit script. The Chequers statement is a product of a person who has not only survived, but shredded the hard Brexit base within her cabinet. With Davis and Johnson gone into the dangerous ether of political disruption, the issue is whether the positions will firm up or loosen. Till then, and even after, few sane individuals will want May’s job.

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