

## We should seize the benefits of Brexit sooner rather than later

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31 AUGUST 2016 • 7:00AM



Leaving the EU offers opportunity for all these ministers to make Britain better

[Theresa May has asked her ministers to meet and bring to Cabinet ideas of how their departments can respond to Brexit.](#)

Over 20 years ago a similar Cabinet meeting was held to plan negotiations on the Maastricht treaty. John Major asked each of us to rate the proposals affecting our departments as “desirable”, “undesirable but tolerable”, or “unacceptable”. Not one minister – even the most Europhile – identified any item as desirable.

Maastricht and successive EU treaties tied our hands. By contrast, Brexit should create new “desirable” opportunities for many departments.

The new trade department has exciting scope for free-trade agreements. For 43 years trade has been the “exclusive competence” of the EU. During the referendum we were told that no one would want to do deals. But countries are queuing up.



There are trade deals to be done

The most worthwhile agreements are with fast-growing emerging economies that have high tariffs. As long as we remain in the EU there is no chance of deals with the two biggest countries – India ended talks with the EU in frustration at 28 member states demanding exclusions and China will not accept the EU's political conditions for talks. But China has a deal with Switzerland, and India is negotiating one. Both would be keener still for one with us. Deals involving 28 countries take forever but bilateral trade deals typically take less than two years. And we can ensure they cover crucial UK industries such as services, which many EU deals exclude.

The Department for International Development can also look to trade as powerful driver. The EU reserves highest tariffs for agricultural and labour-intensive products that developing countries are best able to export. Even where the EU offers tariff-free access to least developed countries its onerous rules mean that this has done far less to boost trade than has America's Africa Growth and Opportunities Act. We can set an example by combining the best EU, US and Canadian policies to help countries trade out of poverty. Every week that we delay Brexit costs the British taxpayer nearly £200 million in membership fees. So both the Treasury and Health (which will have first call on extra spending) should be pushing for a speedy exit.

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Although we will still be able to recruit EU nurses if we wish, leaving should be a stimulus to the NHS and our universities to expand training. At present we turn away up to three quarters of British applicants for nursing courses.

The new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will want to incorporate all EU law and regulations into UK law to give business certainty and enable it to prune, amend and replace items which are unnecessarily burdensome. Assuming the UK retains

the Climate Change Act commitment to reduce emissions by 80 per cent it will be able to reduce the cost of doing so by scrapping EU renewable targets.

The Home Office needs to reassure EU residents here that they will be allowed to remain before extending to EU citizens arriving henceforth the same limits that apply to other friendly countries' nationals, to prevent a "closing-down sale" influx of EU citizens. The housing minister should welcome this restriction since our immigration-fuelled housing shortage lies behind many social problems. This should not be an excuse to build fewer homes but give us the chance to catch up with rising demand.

Education is a major export industry. It is hampered by the arbitrary application of immigration controls focused on non-EU students. Post Brexit that pressure may ease. And we provide the equivalent of nine universities for EU students, financed by UK loans that are rarely repaid. We should seek a deal where European governments underwrite and collect those loans and we pay for UK students in the EU.

These are but a few of the opportunities that Brexit will create.

Project Fear happily did not become a self-fulfilling prophecy but Project Delay can extend damaging uncertainty as well as postponing the fruits of our new freedom. So let's hope ministers press for speeding up Brexit. Joining the EC was far more complex than leaving: and that barely took two years.

Peter Lilley was a Cabinet minister between 1990 and 1997