

The Telegraph

Theresa May's honourable Brexit deserves more chivalrous treatment



AMBROSE EVANS-PRITCHARD

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The campaign against Theresa May's Brexit is poisonous and does great damage CREDIT: JUSTIN TALLIS

The relentless attempt to portray Theresa May's Brexit plan as extreme and provocatively hostile to Europe is degenerating into a systemic lie.

Even if you agree with Sir John Major that Brexit is a "historic mistake", it is hard to imagine steadier and more cautious leaders than the Prime Minister and her Chancellor. Both are Remainers trying to play a very difficult hand as best they can.



Former prime minister Sir John Major delivers a speech on the future relationship between Britain and the European Union this week CREDIT: WILL OLIVER

This campaign – for that is what it has become – inflames a false debate about Brexit. It is fanning a constitutional crisis over Scotland and Northern Ireland that might otherwise be defused.

The sloganeering is picked up and echoed by the global media, perpetuating a dark legend of nativist tribalism on these islands, and depicting Brexit as hostile to free trade and a "rules-based" global system. It is poisonous and does great damage.

Sir John Major is right that some Brexiteers would advance their cause better with "a little more charm, and a lot less cheap rhetoric". Triumphalism is never attractive – though was it not he who claimed "game, set, and match" at Maastricht in December 1991?

Yet one must rebut his insinuation that the British people are being lured into a trap of complacency by dishonest promises. For months the Cameron government used the machinery of the state to warn them of a Gothic fate if they voted "Leave" – but vote "Leave" is what they did.

The campaign against Mrs May rests on the false dichotomy of soft and hard Brexits, an issue on which I have shifted my view. As readers may know, I wanted the Norwegian option temporarily, to preserve access to the single market while we forged new trade deals. But it is not worth dying in a ditch for the European Economic Area (EEA).



The City: an EEA deal would leave it at the mercy of a regulatory system controlled by others CREDIT: REUTERS

Even those most hurt are not categorical about this. The British Bankers' Association (BBA) is wary of an EEA deal since it would leave the City at the mercy of a regulatory system controlled by others, and the totemic right to "passporting" is overstated. The concept is not a legal term. It is City argot.

Nor does the BBA want "equivalence", another term bandied around. "It would never do for us. It is insecure and one side can withdraw on a political whim at any time," said the BBA's chief, Anthony Browne.

What the City wants – given that Brexit itself cannot be reversed – is a bilateral deal with a dispute tribunal outside the clutches of the European Court. Broadly speaking, that is what the Government is pushing for. There is nothing reckless about it.

It is invariably taken for granted in this parallel Brit-to-Brit slanging match that Europe's leaders deem a "hard Brexit" to be a hostile act, or that the European Commission considers itself in a state of latent war with Downing Street.

That is not my reading of the mood in Europe, and it was certainly not the message from the commission's vice-president Frans Timmermans at the Munich Security Conference.

"Let's listen to Hippocrates and do as little harm as possible. We don't want to harm ourselves, and we don't want to harm you. We respect your decision. We deplore it, but it is your sovereign decision. If we all accept that premise, we can come out of this without too much damage," he said.



European Commission's vice-president Frans Timmermans CREDIT: OLIVIER HOSLET

Those who count in the EU power structure welcomed the Prime Minister's Lancaster House speech as a friendly overture, an impression sealed by her trenchant defence of the European cause in Donald Trump's Washington.

Most have come round to the view that it may be better for both sides after all if Britain leaves the single market and the customs union, opting for a strategic relationship built on different foundations. "They like the clarity of May's message. Britain is not trying to have its cake and eat it any longer," said Charles Grant from the Centre for European Reform.

The chorus of voices warning against "cherry-picking" has faded because the issue has become irrelevant. As Mrs May put it: "We do not seek to hold on to bits of membership as we leave."

The script in EU capitals has moved on. "There is absolutely no point in having a destructive negotiation between the EU and the UK," said Italian premier Paolo Gentiloni in London.

Germany's finance minister Wolfgang Schauble has been effusively gracious, vowing that his country will strive to ensure there was no sudden rupture at the end of the two-year talks. "We are very concerned that it will not happen, and we will be engaged. It would be a disaster for all of us. We have to minimize the damage for the United Kingdom and Europe," he said.

Spain's foreign minister Alfonso Dastis said it would be folly to damage relations with Britain out of ideological pedantry. "We don't see this as a battle in which one side has to come out as the victor and the other as the vanquished," he said.

Whatever the initial shock reactions after June 23 last year, it never was plausible that Europe would try to treat Britain as a pariah state. The interlocking ties of security, defence, and commerce run too deep.

British troops and Typhoon aircraft defend the Baltic and Balkan borders of the EU. They help to anchor the US in Nato. "We're partners, and to start divorce negotiations between partners is very difficult. It is easier with an enemy," said Lithuania's president Dalia Grybauskaitė in Munich.



British troops and Typhoon aircraft defend the Baltic and Balkan borders of the EU. They help to anchor the US in Nato CREDIT: MATT CARDY

Poland's foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski issued a plea at the Munich forum to bind the UK as tightly as possible to Europe, and he warned that Brexit will be repeated unless the EU listens to the wake-up call. "I don't think it was a capricious moment in the life of Great Britain. It was a decision because they could not stand the situation in Europe any longer, and others will follow," he said.

Might some on the European side misjudge their strength, calculating that they can dictate any terms they wish? There is a hint of this in "After Brexit: it's a brave new world", a paper by the EU-funded Centre for European Policy Studies in Brussels. It asserts that Brexiteers are wrong to think that Britain's trade deficit with the EU is a trump card in negotiations. The paper cites "multiple studies" showing size is what matters in trade theory and that Britain will suffer double the losses in absolute terms (€110bn) under a retreat to World Trade Organisation rules, and 10 times as much in relative terms. Actually the studies demonstrate no such thing.

In any case, this sort of argument overlooks the central role that the City plays as the "investment banker for Europe", to quote the Bank of England's Mark Carney. It fatally misjudges the fragility of the eurozone structure.

Britain is a cohesive nation state with functioning institutions. It can withstand a long siege. Monetary union remains dysfunctional and would disintegrate under further stress. If anything, the asymmetry goes the other way. I doubt that any finance ministry in Europe wishes to put this to the test.

It is of course a dangerous situation for all involved. The talks will be bloody from time to time. But that is not the fault of Theresa May. Nothing is achieved at this point by trying to misrepresent her Brexit strategy as strategic vandalism - unless you are trying to reverse Brexit altogether.

She is the serving Prime Minister of this country in conditions akin to wartime. Sir John Major would be more chivalrous to remember that.



Theresa May: Prime Minister in conditions akin to wartime CREDIT: PA

As for Tony Blair's call for the people to rise up and stop the "present rush over the cliff's edge", it is almost seditious. If there is a cliff, it is the Lisbon Treaty – which he negotiated as leader, and which extends the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) to any area it wants through the elastic mechanism of the Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Mr Blair secured an opt-out from the charter under Protocol 30, and returned home triumphantly to tell the Commons that Britain's protection was "absolutely clear".

The ECJ later swept aside his protocol as a worthless piece of paper. Britain woke up to find that itself under a supreme court with supra-sovereign powers. Large matters, Mr Blair.



