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BLAME BREXIT NOT MRS MAY

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In the confused discussion surrounding the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration negotiated by Mrs. May with the EU 27, two particular criticisms are frequently voiced. Mrs. May, we are told on all sides, has failed to respect the result of the EU referendum of June 2016; and her failure is at least partly due to having triggered prematurely the Article 50 notification without a strategy for the negotiations. Both criticisms are unjust. The Agreement and Declaration are the logical and predictable outcome of the deluded vote for Brexit cast by 37% of the electorate in 2016; and there was no better plan available to her in 2017 or later for implementing Brexit than the path she chose.

The central argument of the “Leave” campaign in 2016 was that British membership represented an unacceptable balance of rights and obligations for the UK: a more favourable balance could and would be established after Brexit, with most rights being maintained and most obligations shuffled off. Many years of anti-EU propaganda had predisposed many voters to believe that the EU was a uniquely malevolent and incompetent organisation, rife with fraud and hypocrisy. It did not seem implausible therefore to believe that a bold severing of ties with this moribund dinosaur could swiftly, easily and advantageously lead to a redressing of the unfavourable balance of rights and responsibilities from which the UK suffered within the EU. Many voters thought they were voting for just such an outcome in 2016, encouraged in that aspiration by the leading “Leave” campaigners.

The past two years and the product of Mrs. May's negotiations have shown beyond any doubt how misplaced such expectations were. It is now manifest that those voting "Leave" in 2016 voted in fact for a less advantageous relationship of the UK with its most important political and economic partner, the EU. From the day after the referendum, such a disadvantageous relationship was the only conclusion of the negotiations that our EU partners were ever willing to concede or even envisage. The damaging and tawdry equivocations of the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration do nothing to conceal this bleak reality.

Much was made during the referendum campaign and immediately after of the supposed advantages that the UK held in its future negotiations with the EU. This line of argument was based in particular on the nugget of truth that some (by no means all) countries of the EU have a substantial positive trade balance with the UK. If those who made such claims were capable of such an emotion, they would feel shame today at the wild claims they made in 2016 and 2017 about German car-manufacturers and French cheese-producers who would supposedly compel their national governments to allow the UK unfettered access to the EU's internal market. These claims, deluded at best, mendacious at worst, succeeded in persuading many British voters that firmness and diplomatic skill would suffice to face down initial sulkiness from our European partners at the prospect of the UK's striking out on its own path.

Always a worse deal

Most of the British electorate, and particularly the Leave-voting portion, was in June 2016 unaware of the asymmetry in negotiating power between the UK and the EU, and the determination of the EU to make use of that negotiating power in the Brexit negotiations. Those who have followed the negotiations over the past two years with any degree of attention now know better. The majority, who have not followed the negotiations in detail, are only now confronted with the unwelcome insight that most of the rhetoric surrounding Brexit in 2016 bore little relationship to reality. What the electorate thought it was voting for has not been achieved two years later, and indeed never can be achieved. This is a profoundly disorienting moment for much of the British political class. This disorientation does much to explain the febrile and often fantasy-driven nature of much current discussion of European issues.

In the latter part of 2016, Mrs. May was under much pressure from the radical Eurosceptics in her Party to deliver the Article 50 notification and thus start the timetable towards British withdrawal. It is now often claimed that she would have been better advised to have postponed this notification and taken time to evolve a more coherent plan for the conduct of the Brexit negotiations. If she wished to remain Prime Minister of a Conservative government Mrs. May had little choice but to accede to pressure from within her Party and trigger the Article 50 process. More importantly, she and her colleagues did have an underlying analysis of how the Brexit negotiations could be turned to British advantage. This analysis was deluded and factually incorrect, but it was so intrinsic to the Brexit process that no amount of delay or reflection could ever have sufficed to contradict it. Only contact with bitter negotiating reality could have had any prospect of doing so.

False prospectus

Two propositions were central to the British governmental analysis going into the Brexit negotiations, first that the UK's overall trade deficit and net budgetary contribution gave the UK an immense advantage in the negotiations; and second that the EU's member states had such varied economic interests in the negotiations that it would be easy for the UK to provoke and profit from resulting disunity among the member states themselves and between the member states and their representative Michel Barnier. If these two propositions had been accurate, we would today be looking at a very different Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration. That the British government began the negotiations so much in error was not, however, a matter of hazard. It arose from and reflected some of the most central and motivating misconceptions of Brexit.

It has been a familiar complaint of the UK's partners in the EU that successive British governments have adopted and encouraged an exclusively "transactional" approach to the EU. This British attitude might well go some way to explain the overestimation of the negotiating leverage given to the UK by trade deficit and budgetary contributions. But the misconception goes deeper. The other member states have their own understanding of "transactionalism" and certainly expect their membership to confer net benefits on their own countries. They employ, however, a different calculus for assessing these benefits from those habitually employed by British politicians and officials. For the 27 member states who will remain in the EU after Brexit the maintenance of the system of reciprocal rights and obligations has a long-term value for themselves, economic, political and social, which easily outweighs any temporary or passing economic disruption caused by Brexit. This system would be jeopardised by allowing the seceding UK to continue to enjoy the benefits of, for instance, the internal market without accepting the corresponding obligations. It was a fundamental delusion of the Brexit prospectus to assume that the rest of the EU could be persuaded to see the Brexit negotiations through the same set of dismissive assumptions as those of British Euroscepticism.

Barnier speaks for 27

A related Brexit-inducing misconception was highlighted by the persistent belief of Mrs. May's government that it would be possible to foment disunity within the EU and in particular between the member states and Michel Barnier. Conventional British analysis, even among some who favour British membership, is that the EU's central institutions are by their very nature over-reaching, arrogant and centralising, enjoying little public or political support in the member states. This is factually incorrect, but has led to the arrogant assumption since 2016 that it would be possible to conduct parallel negotiations with member states to undermine Mr Barnier's authority and effectiveness. Such attempts have been uniformly counter-productive, well exemplified by the remark of Mrs. Merkel during the Salzburg summit that she was relying on "Michel to explain what Theresa wanted." Ex-Commissioner Barnier clearly enjoyed the trust and respect of those mandating him to negotiate on their behalf. British negotiators had in effect become the victims of their own propaganda. Far from pursuing an egotistic power-seeking agenda of his own, Mr. Barnier was faithfully carrying out the wishes of his clients. During these negotiations the UK was confronted with a united, coherent and powerful EU, well aware that its interests and those of the UK were in

many respects divergent. Given the disparity of negotiating power between the two sides, it was unpardonable wishful thinking on the British side to imagine that such a process could end well for the UK. If the results of Mrs. May's negotiations are unsatisfactory, then that faithfully reflects the deluded expectations placed in Brexit by its advocates in 2016 and since.

It is not by chance that Mrs. May's proposals have been criticised from opposing points of view, since they are simultaneously vague and constraining. They make clear that for a number of years to come the UK will continue to pay into the EU's budget and accept entirely its regulatory structure; during that period the UK will be a rule-taker, not a rule-shaper; and the Irish backstop makes it very difficult to imagine that the UK will ever be able to leave some form of Customs Union with the EU. But the prospect of "frictionless" trade between the EU and the UK, promised by those advocating Brexit, remains as distant a chimera as ever. No clarity exists or can exist about the long-term future trading relationship, except that its terms will be less favourable than now. It was the supreme arrogance of the Brexit prospectus to hope that it would be possible to charm, bully or cajole the EU to allow the UK to "have its cake and eat it" after Brexit. The documents Mrs. May is putting to the Commons are the final proof of the vacuity of this prospectus.

There is another way

Until he recently adapted his rhetoric to his government's present version of political reality, Philip Hammond used to like to claim that nobody voted in 2016 for the country "to become poorer." He now claims that there are "more important things than money." This is his implicit recognition that 37% of the electorate did indeed vote in 2016 for the country to become poorer, having been fraudulently persuaded that they were voting for something quite different. It could reasonably be argued in Mrs. May's defence that she has done her best to carry out the impossible and unrealistic mandate of the referendum, to the winning of which fantasies about the UK's real power and position in the world were centrally important. Brexit could only have been made to "work" in the highly unlikely event that the EU was willing to collude in the perpetuation of these fantasies. It was the specific assumption of much pro-Brexit rhetoric in 2016 that the EU would be willing to engage in such collusion. Over the past two years it is the EU that has held all the cards and has seen no particular reason to pretend otherwise.

There are signs of a growing awareness among MPs that the shortcomings of Mrs. May's "deal" derive almost exclusively from the delusions and incoherence of the whole Brexit project. It is heard from unexpected quarters that it would be better to remain within the EU as a full and influential partner than to accept the prospect of second-class status implied by the Withdrawal Agreement and Political Declaration. As March 2019 approaches the claims that "no deal" is better than a "bad deal" ring ever more hollow in the minds of most MPs. Those MPs will over the coming fortnight need to take a fateful decision, whether to persist in the delusion that there is a significantly better "deal" than Mrs. May's in prospect with a different Prime Minister or to accept the reality that her deeply unattractive proposals are the best available. If they follow the latter course some MPs may indeed conclude that they have no choice but to support the Prime Minister in order to avoid the catastrophe of "no deal." The bolder and more honourable course would be to admit frankly that the

referendum result was a mistake based on fantasy and deception that needs urgently to be reviewed by the electorate in a further referendum. As British politics enters over the coming weeks a period of political instability unparalleled since the Second World War, there may be more scope for boldness and honour than in quieter times. Calls for a People's Vote may very well become an avalanche sweeping initially hesitant MPs along in its train.

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◀ THERESA MAY ◀ WITHDRAWAL AGREEMENT